Monster Girl Saga Vol2

Monster Girl Saga - II

Anonemoose

Chapter 16

In my desperation, I found myself wandering into a den of hyenas, a quaint little lodge half a day's walk from the southern border. The wooden walls looked ready to rot; there was dirt, spit and the smell of urine and feces everywhere. It seemed to be the watering hole for every bandit, murderer or worse in the area. The din was rife with profanity, threats and obnoxious laughter. Everyone boasted about their recent victims like you'd expect someone to boast about the size of a fish they caught the other day. There wasn't any shortage of these men either. The place was packed, and every table was full. There was hardly any room to move which was very bad news; one errant bump against some drunk's shoulder and a fight broke out. These fights were likely to end with a shiv stuck in someone's gut.

I was amazed this place could so brazenly exist in plain sight. I had no idea what was going on in this region, and every time I had asked Rose about it she shrugged her shoulders. Her attempts to explain with a lack of knowledge born from apathy gave me the impression that the lands south of here were rife with blood feuds. Families were greedily scrambling to claim all the land they could. This king reigning in the south, whose name Rose once again couldn't recall, couldn't be bothered to stop any of it. As long as they were paying their tithes, if they were busy fighting each other, they wouldn't have the time to plot against such an irresponsible king.

This northern area was a frontier, an unexplored land. Apparently, people with nothing came up here for a fresh start, and sometimes that fresh start was thrust on them. It seemed this northern region had become a dumping ground, a penal colony for many nations in the south. This only made the crime situation even worse, and no one seemed to care at all when these convicts found other ways to survive aside from carving out their own little farm on the prairie. When I asked Rose if this was true she punched me playfully in the shoulder. She'd never heard of anyone making a colony like that and told me to get my mind out of the gutter. I thought my curiosity was wise, but Rose was right to say I was also stupid. I should have learned by now not to see Rose as a possible spring of common knowledge and sense.

One thing was for certain; with all these criminals running around and travelers being suspected for spies, if we tried to cross the border as we were it would cause a fuss, and that fuss would attract the attention of our pursuers. They'd zero in on us in a heartbeat. Even if we snuck past, if we got caught without permits and papers further

in, the same thing would happen. With that said, we both found ourselves sitting on the opposite side of a table from one of the most powerful crime lords in the North. The people called him nothing else other than 'Boss'. If you dressed a turn of the century New York mafia don in animal furs, you'd probably not spot a difference. His escort was equally intimidating, thugs with not much to them but muscle and scars.

Rose and I had cloaked ourselves hide our identities. The Thorn Knight is an infamous figure in this part of the world. That blazing tail of hers alone could easily give her away from more than a hundred paces away. Luckily with the disguise no one seemed the wiser. A couple of gold coins Rose had pinched from a bank in Brun through her guild membership had gotten their attention and bought this meeting. If they had known a monster known to many as a mass murder was sitting across a table this meeting probably wouldn't have happened. Now we just had to discuss the price to smuggle ourselves.

“So let me make sure I got this straight.” Boss said wearily. “You want to pay to smuggle the two of you across the border?”

“That's correct.” I replied earnestly.

One corner of Boss's lip curled up in disgust, “I don't even know you. You think I'm stupid? I'm gonna risk taking you two on one of my routes?”

“I didn't say you were. I just said you might if there was enough money in it.”

“And I don't like how much you stress the Church can't find out. They're starting to crawl all over the place up here. It's bad for my business.” Boss barked.

“We're good for the money. The two coins up front should prove that. We get to the Free Ports, and we pay the rest of what you want.” I was trying sound as if I was pleading, but I had to humble myself a little to keep him on the hook.

“I said I don't know you.” Boss hissed. “Two nobodies come in here one night and start wanting to give me money. That one won't even show her face.” Boss said pointing his fat finger at Rose.

Rose lifted her head a little, the shadow of the cloak covering her face showing just the bottom half of her face. She hadn't said a thing and barely budged from her seat. But after finally showing a bit of

her face, with its feminine charm, the attitude of the thugs surrounding us changed a little. Boss in particular.

Boss snorted a little laugh, “You and your lady friend want outta the north huh? You got some stones to bring her along to a place like this.”

“I wouldn't trust to leave her alone outside with guys like us around either.” Said one of the thugs jokingly which was met with laughter from the others.

“You some punk blue blood who find out life up here ain't all it’s cracked up to be?” Boss asked.

“I'm just trying to get back home.” I said truthfully.

“Why bother?” Said another of the thugs. Boss didn't seem to mind the interruption. “Lots of women folk up here. If you're not picky that is.”

“Yeah,” Boss agreed with a smile on his face. “Maybe you'd find yourself liking it here.”

“How much do you want to get us south?” I asked trying to get back on topic.

“I mean, I'm sure I could make a pretty coin for sure doing it my way.” Boss wasn't looking at me and had turned to his cronies who replied with nods and laughter.

I had a bad feeling things had fallen apart. It didn't take long, but when I put out my hand to collect the two gold coins displayed on the table the Boss's own fist slammed on top of them, just a hair's width from crushing my own hand.

“What do you think you're doing with your gift to me boy?” Boss said with a predatory look on his face.

“So you're not going to help me then?”

“I could. I just don't want to.” Boss said mockingly.

I had kept my humility up until this moment, but now I narrowed my eyes, furrowed my brow and scowled at Boss. I dragged my hand back across the table and wrapped it around the handle of my flagon I had ignored up until now.

“Oh?” Boss said noticing the change in mood. “What are you gonna do? I'd like to see you try.”

Boss gave a glance to the thugs around him, and they spread out to surround our table completely. The other tables in the lodge stopped their own conversations having noticed what was going on and started to watch the spectacle unfold. I calmly raised my flagon from the table.

Boss gave his orders, “Take the boy out back. For the girl, escort her out, or just kick her out. Whatever you feel in the mood for tonight.”

“One last thing.” I said; the thugs stopping and stayed stop when Boss gave them the nod to wait. “I hoped to convince you this could have been a good deal. Now the missis will have to convince you that it 'was' a good deal.” I then tipped my flagon in toast to Boss and gave him a smile.

Before the thugs took another step forward, the table we had been seated at was flung into the air. It flipped end over end before crashing down on top a group of patrons who panicked as they tried to scramble away. By the time the thug to my right reacted, Rose was already on her feet. She was small, weighing only a little more than half of any one of them, but they'd bear witness to this woman's inhuman strength. She grabbed hold of the thug's wrist, spun her body around and pulled him over her shoulder. The man's feet were lifted off the ground, and then his body was brought down on a nearby table. It snapped in two when his back cracked against it; he was then sent slamming into the floor below it with a thud where he was put out like a light.

The second thug on my left had barely noticed things had started to go very wrong when Rose lunged over and connected a solid punch to his chest which sent him stumbling backwards tripping over another patron minding his own business. The two of them fell to the floor together in one giant mess of limbs, a now broken chair and a froth of spilled beer. There was a moment of stunned silence with a break in the action as Boss and the remaining thugs hung around and tried to understand what had just happened. I look right at Boss and took a drink from my beer. It was a chore to swallowing it. I don't know what piss takes like; but if I had to take a guess, it tasted similar this excuse for filthy water masquerading for beer. There would be no surprise if my face was contorting in disgust against my will as I tried to maintain a steely poker face.

“Don't just stand around you idiots, get them!” Boss screamed while rising to his feet as well.

His thugs were well disciplined to say the least; they didn't hesitate when they moved in for the attack. 'We were just caught off guard', they were probably saying to themselves. The third thug moved in, this time not toward me but right at Rose. The thug threw his whole weight into a right hook; a punch blocked by Rose as she deftly threw her left forearm up and pushed it away. A solid kick to the side of the thug's left knee to put the thug off balance followed by a solid gut punch with her right fist dropped him quickly to the floor where he rolled away in pain.

From behind, the fourth thug appeared; the cloak Rose was wearing seemed to have thrown off her balance and spacing as he managed to quickly grab hold of it by the scruff of the neck. He tried to pull back on it and bring Rose down; instead Rose slipped out from the oversized robe, spun around grabbed it by the bottom hem in her left claw and twirled it around the thug's arm. Rose easily reeled in the thug to her waiting red armor plated elbow which connected with the thug's solar plexus. I'd be surprised if he would be able to breath much at all after the audible thump of the impact had him gasping for air and collapsing backwards onto the floor.

The whole room went silent. Rose's disguise was discarded; she stood there surrounded on all sides by many criminals, vagrants and miscreants most of them at least a head's worth of height taller and some weighing twice as much. She scanned the room; her wild eyes sizing up everyone in sight. While the onlookers looked on with faces that were slowly turning to terror. She cracked her knuckles as she waited anxiously for the next person to attack. On the ridge of her tail her signature flame had kicked up into an inferno. If her crazy battle hungry smile wasn't a dead giveaway already, she was itching to continue the fight and take on all challengers.

“O-okay.” Boss stuttered. “You've made your point. Just call her back-”

“No can do.” I said and took another drink.

“W-what?” Boss flustered

“I don't tell her what to do.” I said as I took yet another drink, “I could get her to stop. I just don't want to.”

Not needing to hear anything more, Rose lashed out on her own. Now on the offensive, she charged forward and unleashed a flurry of punches against another of the thugs standing idly by. The poor bastard didn't have a chance, after about the sixth punch he lost consciousness and hit the floor. Another thug let loose a battle cry and tried to spear tackle Rose from behind only to meet her raised scaled knee forehead first. Rose wasn't even budged or thrown off balance standing on one leg. The thug's head was thrown backwards in the most unnatural way; a serious case of whiplash if he was lucky. Either way, he collapsed face first into the ground at Rose's feet after coming to a dead stop just a second before.

As the battle raged and got out of control, the other patrons of the lodge all stood up, the barkeep retreated behind his counter and there was a stampede to get out. Even with all the people fleeing around us, the thugs threw themselves between Rose and their boss, but like a sickle through wheat she was quickly throwing them all to the ground. With one last thug standing between Boss and the two of us he pulled out a small sword and swung downward in panicked desperation screaming, 'stay away!' The sword made contact but against the back of Rose's left hand. There was a clang, but there was no blood. The thug dropped his short sword shaking in fear. He turned to get away but Rose pounced upon him.

“Enough! Please!” Boss screamed as he fell back on his chair.

“Hey, Rose.” I called out. I was beginning to think she had done enough convincing.

Rose stopped with a thug weighting at least fifty kilograms more than herself and more than a head taller in a one armed headlock. The thug was clawing at Rose's forearm trying to pull it off in vain. He couldn't even stand upright; Rose had him hunched over and held in place.

“Rose. I think they're convinced.”

She slowly came back to her senses and turned to face me with the thug still in tow. The flame on her tail died down a little, and the wild look in her eyes became a lot calmer. She even seemed to become aware of the man she had pinned still struggling to get away. His face seemed to be begging, 'you heard him, can you let me go please?' She smiled at the man who was looking up at her in terror. He returned a nervous smile. Not the least bit perturbed, Rose then

slammed her free fist into the side of the thug's face. There was a sickening crunch of snapping bone, and she released her hold and let him drop to the floor in a heap.

I got up from my seat and walked over to Boss. As I did he backed up and fell out of his chair. I stood over him and squatted down to his level. He didn't make any other move to get away. There was no longer anyone else but us three and a bunch of knocked out or moaning incapacitated thugs rolling around on the floor. I reached out and fished around in his pocket and took the two gold coins I had presented earlier and tucked them away.

“That's the Thorn Knight? Isn't she?” Boss asked trembling.

“Yeah. That's right.” I replied.

“Who the hell are you? How the hell did you tame that monster?”

“Tame? That's a rude thing to say.”

A clawed foot came crashing down between Boss' legs, breaking the wood panel floor with ease. Boss tensed up and froze with fright. Rose had stepped in with a mean look on her face; eyes filled with malice.

I had to ask, “Rose. Was that necessary?”

“I thought we were playing good guard bad guard.” She said disappointed.

“Look,” Boss said trying to explain himself. “I was lying. It's not that I don't want to. I can't.”

“You can't?” My voice was rising in anger.

“It doesn't work that way. I don't move people south. I move em north. Moving people south isn't part of my deal I got going.”

“Only moving people north?” I thought on that for a moment. I came to a conclusion quickly, “You're human trafficking. Not running illegal immigration.”

“What? No.” Boss wasn't calm at all trying to refute me.

“You want to drag me out back. You don't care what happens to a girl. It's better you get used to living up here you said. I

can only guess you're in one business. You are concerned about the Church and not guards on the border." I stood up, pointed my finger accusingly at Boss dramatically and declared, "You're selling men to the monsters up here."

Rose let out a long 'oh' and showered me with a solitary round of applause. It made the whole scene look ridiculous, but Boss' reaction and the look on his face screamed, 'how did you know?'

"So that's how it is then?" I sighed.

"How do you think anyone up here survives?" Boss had become rather defiant. "Everyone is piss poor, and people are sent here to be forgotten. Monsters have valuables; you just gotta give em the right currency. That's all."

"And the church appreciates you for aggravating their monster problem by handing over mates."

"You're one to talk! Getting friendly with a monster. Gods damn you for-"

Rose slammed her foot down on Boss's ankle, and I heard it snap like a twig. Boss howled in pain and rolled into the fetal position and nursed his broken leg.

I was losing my patience and ignored what Rose had done, "So getting friendly is the bad part? I guess the people you hand over aren't." The next leap in logic came to me suddenly after that. "You're kidnapping and handing them over kicking and screaming too?"

Boss didn't say a thing.

"Rose. We best be leaving now. We'll have to find another way."

Boss started laughing, "There is no other way. You won't make it more than three days if you try to sneak south. To the east and north, only the gods know what's there. You're better off running into the nothingness up there and disappearing!"

"What about the west?"

"Ha! The west? Past the Border Mountains is nothing but a waste land. Nothing but cracked stone and sand! A hell on earth pretending to be a desert. Not a drop of water!"

“Blistering heat?”

“Yes! A cursed land where a cursed sun hates all living things.”

I meditated on what Boss had said for a moment, “Yes. That will do.”

Boss didn't seem to follow what I was saying, so I decided to give a demonstration.

“I've learned one fascinating thing a Salamander is capable of.”

I picked up a piece of broken chair and held it behind Rose's back. She was rather confused and tried looking back to see what I was doing, but she stood still regardless. Soon the piece of wood had caught fire, and I threw it down in front of Boss. It wasn't a normal kind of fire. It was more like napalm, and soon the floor around the piece of wood caught fire too, and it began to spread.

“A Salamander can control her own body temperature. Warming herself well beyond the heat of her surroundings.” I took Rose by the hand; doing that so suddenly caused her to blush. “With just this much physical contact. I can borrow some of that heat.”

Boss watched with disbelief as I didn't ignite when the flames spread and licked at me. His shock didn't last long though; it didn't stand up to the fright and panic when the flame spread quickly to catch his pants on fire. He tried to crawl away, but with one ankle broken he could hardly move away fast enough as the fire continued to spread. I had never seen a man relieve himself of his trousers as quickly as Boss did. His pair of pants fully erupted into flames and turned to ash almost immediately soon after.

“A little desert heat isn't going to stop me. Even this fire can't hurt either of us right now. If I were you though, I'd get you and your men out of here.”

The shanty was already falling apart though. Parts of the roof collapsed onto the floor in burning heaps. A large crossbeam landed between us and Boss. Soon the inside of the building was an inferno. Ignoring everything else and walking hand in hand, Rose and I made our way toward the exit of the lodge while the fire was overtaking the entire building. The storeroom where we had to place our things before entering was still locked. The bartender had fled long ago, but that

didn't stop Rose from kicking down the door to collect out things and then making our unhurried escape.

When we finally stepped outside and were about twenty paces from the entrance, Rose stopped to ask me, “Should I put that out?”

“You could. But do you want to?”

She placed a talon on her chin and thought for a moment before responding, “Nah. Not really.”

“That's a little cruel don't you think?”

“Only because they tried attacked you. I won't forgive anyone who does something like that. They put up a poor fight too.” She said dismissively.

So the two of us continued walking into the night as the building behind us erupted into flames. I was looking for an opportunity to pull my hand away, but Rose had long since caught my hand in her own vice like grip. The night was a little cold, so I guess I couldn't really complain.

Chapter 17

Beyond the Border Mountains which lie west across the steppes of the northern regions, we journeyed into The Nameless Wastes. It was a fitting name to say the least. After passing between the mountains, where life became increasingly scarce the further we went in, we eventually reached the land of cracked earth and endless sand. For a moment, I thought we had strayed onto Arrakis. If someone told me the two of us were the only living things in this desert I would believe them.

In every direction, I saw the constant shift of a mirage. The sun above was punishing, or so I concluded it must be. I didn't feel a thing. I wasn't even sweating. If I closed my eyes, I could say that I was marginally warmer than room temperature. Why? Because Rose and I were walking hand in claw.

I was completely correct in my earlier conclusion. Rose, a creature called a salamander, can raise her internal body temperature and actually create a new homeostasis at will. There was some level of magic at work that allowed her not only raise her temperature but also have her body function. She could share that internal temperature through physical contact. I wasn't even going to try to understand it. All I cared about was that it was fifty degrees or more in this desert, and I didn't notice. I was holding her hand for my own survival, but Rose was almost skipping with a pleasant smile on her face.

My mind had been racing and trying to process all this new information. Not that there was anything else to do. There wasn't even anything to look at. My mind flashed back to the scene at the lodge. How easily Rose had managed to toss around grown men, hardened men, criminal veterans. It seemed like it was child's play to her. How did someone who couldn't weigh more than fifty kilograms exert enough force to knock men literally twice her size off their feet?

Then I remembered something. Muscles when heated exert more energy and a higher turnover at reduced efficiency. The effect was negligible, but the muscles in these experiments were only a couple of degrees higher for an extra joule or two of energy. But what would happen if those muscles were heated to several hundred degrees? I don't understand how, but if I was on the right track it explained where all that power was coming from. Rose's appetite seemed to explode afterward as well. All signs pointed to it, but I couldn't be sure.

There were forces at work in this world beyond my

understanding. Perhaps these strange forces—which I have decided to label as magic—were responsible for plucking me from my home and planting me in this strange land. That didn't answer why my memories were missing, but I figured the only way I was going to find a way back home was to figure out exactly how this world functioned. It obviously did not function on all the same rules as my own.

Every so often Rose would spontaneously start talking about some old war story. Some warrior she fought and defeated. She was the most ecstatic about the stories of foes she fought to a draw. The way she described each and every fight made it seem like every encounter was some sort of game. It conflicted with the attitude of others who talked about her. It may be all fun and games to her, but I imagine everyone else saw her as a terrifying creature. The more excited she got, the more vicious and powerful she became. She'd get excited from the prospect of facing a strong opponent and even get excited from the thought that she might lose. She also seemed to revel in violence for violence itself. It created a cycle that fed her own strength until it snowballed into an unstoppable force.

Rose seemed to be the kind of girl who would challenge anyone at a glance. She spent the last ten years, so she says, doing just that. All this money she earned was just a side benefit of her seeking more exciting and challenging fights. Thankfully, she seemed more intent on protecting me rather than fighting me. I wasn't sure how long that honeymoon would last though.

Eventually the night came, and the temperature plummeted. We were hardly prepared to deal with the chilling temperatures. They must have dropped at least to below minus ten degrees Celsius. However, I kept warm because I was being used as a body pillow by Rose. For a lizard who's presumably cold blooded she always radiates a sweltering heat, yet that very heat never burned. It was a rare occasion that I even sweat. My body temperature seemed to match her own if she held on for long enough, so I never had to fear the cold. I must have wasted hours trying to figure that doozy out. I'll just have to concede that there are still many things in this world that lie beyond my comprehension.

Rose's grip was tight, and I couldn't even budge. Sometimes she would toss in her sleep and squeeze harder for a moment. It would actually cause my bones to creak when she did. It wasn't until she had fallen into a much deeper sleep that she calmed down. Her face was very peaceful, and she'd smile every so often. Once she started drooling. I was afraid to imagine what she was dreaming of, so I hoped

to fall asleep quickly as well. I didn't want to be awake if she decided to bite me. Maybe I'd luck out and dream the sensation is something more pleasant.

The second day was no different from the first. The sun burned from dawn to dusk and blistered the land underneath. Sand dunes stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. The Border Mountains to our left were barely visible, and we turned south. Hopefully this gambit worked out. Rose's appetite was greater than usual since she kept us both warmer than the desert heat. If we had to wander the desert for too long, we'd eventually run out of supplies, and that could spell nothing else other than disaster.

Monotony was shattered when we climbed over yet another sand dune and a canyon stretched out before us. It was a scar hidden deep within the desert; we didn't see it from the mountains. The gouge in the earth lay hidden, sunken among the endless sand dunes. A valley long forgotten. It ran north to south and was a very deep cut into the earth. It was a little over a kilometer down, but even then, it was still barren as the desert surrounding it.

“Looks like a river cut it, but I don't see the river.” I said to no one in particular.

“Oh? Why do you say that?” Rose asked earnestly.

“It looks a lot like a canyon back home, just bigger. The Grand Canyon.”

“They really suck at naming things where you're from.” Her voice was a little pointed; she grinned and shrugged in a playful gesture.

I spat out my retort, “Yeah? Well, here they couldn't even give this place a name.”

I don't know why I was being so serious and childish. I was getting caught up in her pace again.

“We can call it the Grander Canyon then.” She said and gave out a hearty laugh.

“Son of a-” I sighed and rubbed my temples with my fingers and tried to calm down and not let myself be baited.

Rose continued laughing until she stopped suddenly. She stood up straight, tail going rigid and her fins twitching. It caused me to

jump a little at how sudden and unexpected it was. I hadn't noticed a change at all myself, nothing, but the wind picking up a bit for the first time we got here. It was blowing in from the east and straight into our faces. If I kept my mouth open I would start tasting sand.

“Wait.” I said. “We're downwind. Don't tell me-whoa!”

Rose pulled me to the ground, and we laid down on the crest of the sand dune. Her nose was twitching, and she started sniffing the air.

After about twenty seconds, she spoke up, “I smell something... Some things.”

Not wasting another second, I reached into one of my packs and pulled out my binoculars. I noticed the sun was directly overhead. 'Not going to make that mistake again', I thought to myself. I scanned the horizons and saw nothing until I looked right where we had come from. Cloaked in white, a group of five were crossing over the sand dunes.

“No... No no no no.” I kept repeating, “It couldn't be.”

“Let me see!” Rose demanded. I barely made the gesture to hand them over when she quickly grabbed and looked through the binoculars into the distance. “Where?”

“The same way we came, Rose. If it's who I think it is, we have to pick up the pace and get out of here. This isn't the place to-”

“Look out!” Rose yelled cutting me off.

Rose slid down the dune and pulled me along with her when she did. She held on tight and wrapped herself around me as we rolled like a log tumbling down a hill. On the crest of the hill where we had been there was an explosion of light. It sounded as if there was a bolt of lightning. That bolt, a streak of light would be more like it, plowed through the sand and kept going above our heads, over the canyon and off into the distance. A moment later, small chunks of what seemed to be raw glass rained down on our heads.

“Five,” I said in a deadpan. “If it's them, there's another one of them now.” I shook my head violently to get my senses back. “Don't tell me that was-”

“Magic.” Rose confirmed my fears and bit down on her lip.

“You're not going to-”

“Not here. Fighting a magic user like that in the open. That would be too much of a handicap.”

It was new and frightening to hear Rose talk about an opponent having a handicap as a bad thing. Then again, that magic user just glassed the top half of a sand dune from about a kilometer away. I wasn't going to blame or belittle her at all.

“But we're up against the canyon. We can't just jump across, and if we stick our head back up, we'll get it blown off.” I thought a little more. “Unless.... Come on Rose!”

I started crawling along the rocky ground and edged nearer to the canyon. Rose didn't say a thing and followed along. I peered over the edge of the canyon and spotted ridges below jutting from the sides of the canyon. They were paths. When Rose peered over after me she spotted them right away as well and gave a pleasant gasp.

“How did you know?” She asked unable to mask her amazement.

“Different layers of rock strata. Makes sense they'd be there if this was carved out by a river.” After taking another look and the feeling of vertigo subsided I noticed a problem. “It's quite a drop to that first ledge though.”

“No problem!” Rose announced with confidence.

Rose stood up, wrapped one arm and me and lifted me off the ground with ease.

“No. Please. Not again!” I screamed.

It just had to be jumping off a cliff yet again. My protests didn't stop Rose. She turned one hundred and eighty degrees after leaping and grabbed hold of the edge with one claw. Then she swung both of us back and forth until she had enough momentum to throw the two of us down onto the ledge about ten meters below. Her clawed feet slammed into the precarious rocky ledge, and it creaked, cracked but didn't break. She let me down, and I fell to rest on all fours for a moment and catch my breath and swallow my panic. There wasn't any time though, so with shaking knees I stood up, and hand in hand we ran down the narrow path.

The path was no wider than my feet were apart at a run and sometimes much less. We had to hug the wall and scoot past the bottlenecks. Rocks would give way; I almost slipped a few times, but Rose's constant grip stopped me from sliding off, and she pulled me back up. Luckily the further we ran the wider and wider the ledge became. It eventually got wide enough that a horse could trot with ease, and eventually even a cart could be moved along the ledge.

After nearly an hour of being on the run we came to something very unexpected. An old rickety wooden suspension bridge. I was dumbfounded, as was Rose. This place was supposed to be a cursed land where nothing lived or could live. Although all the running may have robbed my brain of oxygen, I think I can safely assume that wooden plank suspension bridges were not a natural phenomenon found in rock formations. The bridge spanned for about fifty meters and connected this path to the next one straight ahead.

“I'll go ahead first.” Rose said confidently.

I didn't have enough time to stop her before she started walking across it. It shook violently back and forth and creaked in the most sickening way. Old, frayed and dried out ropes strained, and it sounded like some planks of wood were so brittle they would snap at any moment.

“Rose! I'm heavier. I should go first. If it can't hold my weight, it isn't going to work!”

“No! If it breaks, only I'm going to fall. I won't watch you fall!”

I was too worried to say a word after that, and I watched Rose navigates the bridge till she reached the end. At the other end she laid down, grabbed hold of the ropes and held the bridge steady. I saw where her thinking was taking her; I didn't agree, but I decided I would have to start moving right away. I was thankful I wasn't afraid of heights, just rightfully afraid of leaping off of them. The drop was extreme; it wasn't uniform, but I'm sure I'd ricochet my way to the bottom well below eventually if I did fall off.

The rope bridge strained and creaked louder than before. I was right that my extra weight was going to be too much for it to handle. Time was my enemy now. Too slow and our pursuers were sure to catch up. If it was Zerin, he wouldn't let that drop we took stop him as soon as he figured it out. If I went too fast, the bridge wouldn't handle it. Rose was holding it steady, so it wasn't shaking as much as before,

but the wood planks could break at any time.

As I neared the other end, only a few meters from Rose waiting at the other end, a gust of wind began to blow. It didn't stop at a gust though. A sudden gale whipped up within the canyon. Rose was holding the bridge as tight as she could; but as strong as she held it, the bridge was only so strong. Out of her reach, half way between myself and Rose, the ropes frayed. It happened very fast after the first twanging of old hemp. First, the rope on the left snapped; my weight caused the planks to give way and turned the bridge into a tight rope. I quickly grabbed the other rope, but it couldn't take the strain. The tight rope snapped and swung, and I was carried along for the ride as it fell back below where we had come from.

There was no way for me to stop. A wall of rock was coming closer. I swung underneath the ledge where we were before and ran right into this new sheer rock wall. I was going fast, too fast; I kicked my legs out to break the impact. My knees kicked into my chest; I let go and fell onto another ledge at the base of the wall.

“Laven! Laven!” Rose was screaming; I could hear her over the gale winds and the grating of sand flying through the air.

“Rose!” I yelled back as loud as I could.

“Laven!” Her voice sounded relieved, but it was obvious she was still in a panic. “Are you okay?”

I rolled my joints, and there was no stabbing pain, just a usual dull pain.

“Yeah!” The wind died down, the sand clouds dispersed and I could see Rose high above on the ledge beyond the broken bridge. “There's another ledge down here.”

I looked around to see where it went, but I saw nothing else other than a hole in the canyon wall. It was very close; it was impossible to miss now that the sudden sand storm had died down.

“There's a cave here too.”

“Laven, I'm coming over-” Rose yelled but suddenly went quiet. “Laven, they're getting closer!”

I was very calm now, or perhaps I was just resigned, “Rose. Don't come over here. You can't make that jump.”

“Laven!” She screamed out in protest.

“Just keep going. Try to lose them. I'm going into the cave, and I'm gonna lose them too.” I heard Rose screaming something unintelligible in the distance, so I screamed louder to cut her off, “Rose! Listen to me! I am not abandoning you. We lose them, and then we find each other. You have my scent don't you?” There wasn't a response. “I trust you can find me. Just trust me as well!”

There was silence for a few seconds before she responded, “Laven, please don't die.”

“I don't plan on it. I've still got a lot of work to do to get back home.”

With her blessings and my reassuring words, I took a deep breath and marched toward the cave. The entrance was small; I had to stoop down, crawl and squeeze myself as thin as I could to get through. It was dark. I had forgotten just how dark places could get. I had gotten used to the living torch following me around everywhere. Fishing though my backpack, I found a flashlight, a god send considering the barrage of bad shit I was dealing with right now. I hadn't had a use for it at all until now. My battery power was limited, but there wasn't ever a more pressing time to use it.

I pushed forward into the cave. Beyond the small entrance and a few meters of crawling it gradually started to widen. It widened until I emerged into a larger part of the cave. I whipped my flashlight back and forth and saw it wasn't just a cave I had stumbled into; it was a corridor. Something had dug and cut a hallway with perfect right angle corners. I was nearly blown away.

“Nothing can live here, huh? Something had to have 'lived' here.”

I traced my hand over the side of the corridor as I carefully pushed forward into the darkness. My hopes had gone up. If there was a cut path though the earth, there had to be an entrance and an exit. 'There might be a destination too,' a voice in the back of my head told me. I didn't pay it much attention since engravings started appearing along the walls. I stopped to study them more closely. They may give me a clue to where I was, what this place was or where I was going.

The nature of these drawings was oddly familiar. There was no depth to the characters and pictures like hieroglyphs. That was ridiculous though; this wasn't Egypt or Mesopotamia. They looked

ancient and very worn. There was an endless string of pictograms and murals that didn't cease no matter how far I walked. Images of people, objects and events I hadn't the slightest context to make heads or tails of. I came to a peculiar one. There was an image of men walking; there was some sort of ancient text explaining the story of these men that I couldn't read. The text didn't stop until it reached another image. The same men seemed to be suspended into the air they above a crumbling ground beneath them. I didn't get the hint until it was too late. They were falling.

I took one step too many, and the stone floor beneath me gave way. The ground slanted in an instant at a seventy degree angle, and I went down it like a slide. I screamed in vain as I tumbled and slipped further and further into the dark hole I had been shot into. Head over heels and back again I kept falling down the straight tube until I was ejected out and hit solid ground once again. I had lost my flashlight but noticed a light coming down the tunnel and fast. I was too stunned when it came out at high speed, and the metal tube hit me square in the face.

I blacked out in the darkness, but I remember the last thing I heard was the glass of the lens and bulb shattering. At least that was the last thing I heard until I stirred again and felt the presence of strangers standing over me in the dark. My vision was blurry, and my eyes hadn't adjusted to the dim light. There was a torch lit and hanging above me and a series of very odd noises that normalized from a buzz and muffled nonsense into words.

The voice was haughty, demanding and rude but unmistakably young, feminine and noble, “I ordered you to locate him immediately. What excuse do you have for your incompetence?”

A voice which was a series of unintelligible moans answered her.

“Do not force me to explain myself once more. Your age is not an excuse.”

The pitch of the mumbles increased; the silhouette’s head looked down and me and noticed me stirring.

“He is gaining consciousness? Rectify it then! My entrance must be grander.”

I wasn't able to get a word in before I was hit over the head with some sort of metal pole, and my consciousness entered an even

deeper darkness than before.

Chapter 18

I slowly roused from my unconscious state with a throbbing headache. I was disorientated, hurting and last but not least, scared out of my mind. Even after opening my eyes everything was still pitch black. When I tried to rub my aching head I felt my hands were tied up. Tied to a rod which I felt resting on the back of my neck and shoulders. When I tried to stand up I felt two strong hands push me back down on my knees.

That arrogant voice of the girl from before broke the silence, “The trespasser awakens? Excellent.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “Can someone at least read me my rights?”

“Silence mortal!” The girl screamed. She then cleared her throat and regained her composure, “There will be order in my court. You shall speak when I allow it.”

“No, seriously. If this is a court, I think you're infringing on every right I-”

Her voice was strained again, “Do not force my hand to gag you as well, mortal.”

I decided to keep quiet. I had a bad habit of running my mouth when I was nervous. Blathering helped me think while I stalled whatever horrible thing was going to happen to me next. Right now, it was only going to make matters worse. I could tell that much from my new captor's temper.

“The first order of business.” She declared, “Ladies. Unveil the accused.”

With the two strong hands still holding down my shoulders I heard another slow and limping patter of feet approach me from the front. A pair of dry and clumsy fingers ripped off a layer of fabric from my eyes. I must have been knocked out for quite some time because the torchlight blinded me at first. I had to close my eyes and suffer the sting until I was able to look at my surrounding. When I could, it made sense why I had been so blinded.

Gold. There was gold everywhere. The walls had murals like those in the hallway made of gold. There were gold artifacts, pots, chests, tools and weapons. Even a gold chariot and a small archaic

river boat crafted from polished wood and ivory. Resting on top that boat was a sarcophagus. The face was different, but it looked very much like King Tut's. Did I walk into some museum exhibit? The room was just like one; it was as large as two by two tennis courts and about ten meters high. It would have been quite a comfortable underground bunker if it wasn't crammed to near full capacity with all these objects and people. To the left and right there were two smaller door frames that lead into other rooms. I didn't know what was in them or how big they were, but I was probably dropped inside one of them when I accidentally ended up here.

I then noticed everyone standing around me. There had to be at least a dozen of them that I could see. They were once again all women. What was different this time was that they were mostly covered from head to toe in bandages. They were worn suggestively, some bellies exposed, others, parts of their legs or arms, each one wore theirs differently. Even across their faces. Some covered their eyes, others did not. Some covered only their mouths. Regardless of how they dressed, they all were the same in a single way. They appeared empty, almost lifeless. I came to the conclusion pretty quickly; I had seen enough old horror movies; they were mummies. But they were also all girls, all with smooth perfect brown skin, slim waists and limbs and attractive facial features. I had stumbled once again into some type of monster's lair.

Finally, my gaze fell upon their leader. She sat high above where a pair of eyes, irises dyed crimson red, appraised me. With long jet black hair in a hime cut, bangs hanging just above her eyebrows, straight hair down her back where she almost sat on it as it coiled on the seat beside her and hanging over her shoulders in the front. Atop her head was a strange ornament made of solid gold. It was some sort of crown or tiara., but what concerned me more was that it sat between two black furry ears. Ears that stood tall on top of her head, their white tips reaching for the ceiling above. They looked like dog ears, no, they were dog ears, jackal ears. It wasn't some gimmicky headband. I watched them twitch as the white fibers pouring out from within caught the slightest of vibrations in the stale dead air.

Once again, I had a sickening feeling in my stomach; I was no longer a novice in this sort of scenario. Still, my eyes continued to study this regal looking girl looking down at me. I was struck by the feeling that I was looking upon a tanned skinned young Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra. Like Rose, there wasn't a trace of makeup not even that stereotypical Egyptian makeup upon her face. There was definitely a power in that gaze and captivating natural beauty on her

face.

Unlike Rose, this girl's body didn't show taut skin with hidden muscle underneath; she looked much softer but just as svelte and far more feminine. Her choice in dress wasn't any more modest either. A black-purplish turtleneck crop top adorned her chest. It was skintight and reached down just enough to cover her soft ample breasts. And there hung what must be c-cups, just shy of D. Modest, but not by much compared to Rose. As her chest pushed out and fell back in with each breath, her breasts jiggled ever so slightly. She definitely had a body that looked softer than Rose and- I shook my head to rid myself of my train of thought. This wasn't the time to get hypnotized and start ogling.

Below her chest, on each side of her abdomen, there were two vertical lines with dots underneath. The dots sat on each side of her navel, and the streaks reached up just shy of her breasts. They were white tattoos which stood out against her tan skin. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were exclamation points. She also wore archaic, regal and blue loose fitting pants. The inner thighs, crotch area, and no doubt, buttocks were exposed. It was like an exotic and risqué belly dancer's pants. Within the holes of the groin area, there was a black-purplish pair of bikini panties. Each and every article of clothing was adorned and trimmed with gold. As the amount of torchlight slowly increased, the glistening gold came clearer in to view. There was even the most ornate sky blue and trimmed with gold collar corset worn partly over her crop top.

That was where she was human; but like her ears, her forearms down were covered in jet black fur. Instead of hands she had black wolf paws, pads and all on the palms. One of the digital paws seemed to have been adapted into a thumb on each paw, but all still had soft pads underneath as well. Instead of feet there were black wolf paws and fur that ran up to just before her knees. There was a fluff of white where her tanned skin and black fur met at her elbows and knees. Each and every digit was tipped with long canine claws. Behind her back I could see a bushy jet black wolf's tail swaying back and forth lazily. It wasn't some fetish, it was attached to her lower spine, another tip of white fur at the end drawing patterns in the empty air.

I know enough about my ancient history to come to a conclusion about what I was looking at. The monsters of this world are all a cross between monsters and women, and this girl could be nothing else other than this world's idea of an anubis. A creature from ancient Egyptian mythology. But why was there something so blatantly

Egyptian in this world? I had heard and studied about convergent evolution, but this was getting ridiculous. Maybe our two worlds were connected in some way?

While I had been studying the anubis, she had also been looking over me. Her eyes were judgmental; her stare carried a weight and power that many people tried very hard to emulate with words, actions and status. If I had to pin a word to it, I could say nothing other than 'divine'.

Satisfied with her appraisal, and maybe the look on my face as I appraised her, she spoke again, “Mortal. You are correct; you gaze upon divinity.”

My poker face broke down in an instant. I was genuinely surprised and even a little alarmed to hear her answer what I was thinking.

“A simple mortal like you is but an open book to one with such grace, beauty and intelligence that one such as I possess.” Her voice was thick with hubris as she puffed out her chest.

“I don't see what beauty has to do with it.” I said pointedly. There I went again. Pushed into a corner and lashing out without watching my words.

I thought I saw her eyebrow twitch a little, but she retained her composure and continued, “Now that you are aware of your predicament. We shall continue.”

“And did you set this all up while I was out? Was this supposed to be your big grand entrance?”

She continued, “Now I will decide in my infinite divine wisdom whether-” Oh, now she noticed, and her face contorted in bewilderment and then anger, “W-wha wha what? Of course not! You dare accuse a goddess such as myself of orchestrating entertainment and parlor tricks?”

“Hey. I didn't say anything about entertainment, but if that's what this is about-”

“I commanded silence mortal!” She reached for an ornate gold staff—the head of which was shaped like an old fashioned scale—and pointed it at me. “There will be order in my court!”

“Just tell me what I'm charged with then.”

“You do not make the commands here, mortal.” Her glower and how she said it as a matter of fact didn't leave me any room to disagree.

There was an awkward silence that lingered and continued for about half a minute. I looked around and saw the mummies weren't budging an inch; it was only the Anubis that was fidgeting. She had crossed one leg over the other and was twirling her paw in the air impatiently.

“You are accused of trespassing in the tomb of Pharaoh Amenenofru the First, a most serious and grievous offense.”

What the hell was this girl thinking? Did she just arbitrarily decide on how long before I asked and when she decided to continue was long enough that I wasn't 'commanding' her to do anything anymore?

Once again, she pointed the staff toward my face, “How do you plead?”

I shrugged the best I could and pleaded, “Guilty, I guess?”

She gave a little chortle, “Of course you would plead not- What?” Her whole body jolted as her train of thought hit the brakes and rolled slowly back to the last station. She pointed at one of the mummies, “He said not guilty, correct?”

The mommy moaned something. Something that didn't sit well on the anubis's face. She raised her other paw and clenched it into a fist and gave the mummy a mean glare which caused it to cower and shrivel away in fear.

She turned to another mummy, “You! Did the accused plead not guilty?” She demanded to know.

Having learned from the mistake of the other, this one mumbled and moaned something that put a good mood back on the anubis's face. She then asked two more which caused her good mood to return in full.

“Let it be recorded in the Tome of Law” She held out her free paw and a heavy solid book of gold, more of a binder, with gold slab pages was placed in her waiting paw by an attendant mummy.

“Let it be recorded in the Tome of Law that-” She paused again. “Mortal. What is your name?”

I was just interested in getting this over with so I replied with a sigh but willingly, “Laven.”

She dictated to herself as she prepared to write, “Let it be recorded in the Tome of Law that the accused known as Laven has pleaded not guilty to the charge of trespassing on the Tomb of the Great Amenenofru the First.”

She had opened the book to about the half way point, but the attendant mummy spoke up with a series of moans and slow methodical hand gestures.

The anubis grimaced, “I am aware. But-”

The mummy moaned and made the exact same gestures again.

Her face grimaced harder than before. This time though, the anubis reluctantly turned over the pages of the book until it was on the very first page. It was a peculiar display. With a single claw, she began to scrape the soft metal as she no doubt was making a record inside.

“Is it really such a bad thing that this is the first time you've had to use that book?”

She tweaked out and stopped writing immediately, but not before her claw slipped and scrapped across the surface of the page.

Her paw was quivering a little, but she still spoke with a calm voice, “The accused will remain quiet until summoned in question period.”

When she looked up at me, her eyes were anything but calm. She was downright furious. Well, it wasn't like my situation could get any worse. I've dug myself a hole so deep, and now I feel too tired to even try climbing back out. I'd just lie there at the bottom and accept that I've been captured once again by monsters. At least this time there isn't any impending- Oh shit!

“Hold on. Wait. You've got bigger problems than me. I'm being chased. There are people after me trying to kill me.”

“I said not to speak-” She stopped and gave up on that for

now and instead pressed me for more, “Co-conspirators? No honor among thieves? Your allies decide to eliminate you and take you share of the spoils for themselves?”

“What? No!”

“So you plead 'not guilty' to the second charge of attempted theft?”

“No. This isn't the time for-”

She was already ignoring me and writing in her book, “Let it be recorded in the Book of Law that the accused, Laven, has pleaded not guilty to-” She looked up for a second at me before smiling and going back to writing, “has pleaded 'not guilty' to attempted theft.”

“They're dangerous. Very dangerous. I've got to get out of here. 'We' have to get out of here-”

“I will do no such thing mortal.” Her commanding voice was very sincere now. “It is my charge to watch over the tomb of the great Amenenofru the First until the end of time. I serve only the Pharaoh, and now that his body lies here, and his soul is in the land ever after; I will remain here.” I began to notice her face lightened up every time she spoke about this Pharaoh.

“You feel free to do that. I'll just-”

She cut me off again, “Impossible.”

“Wha-”

“This tomb is sealed.” She pointed her staff behind me. I strained to turn around and look at a massive archway. There was a massive marble gate blocking it off completely covered with inscriptions and pictogram. There wasn't a single shred of hope that could delude me into thinking that thing was meant to move at all. I felt the color drain from me and a sinking feeling settle in my stomach.

The anubis cleared her throat again, “Carrying on. You, Laven, claim not guilty to both charges of trespassing and attempted theft. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

I am shell shocked from seeing no method of escape, so I couldn't mutter a word.

She recited her lines in a hurry, as if she was impatient, “Let it be recorded in the Tome of Law that the accused, Laven, has no defense for his actions. I will now pass my judgment.”

I shook myself to my senses; but before I could object, she passed her judgment.

“As the guardian of Amenenofru the First's tomb; and the power invested with me therein, I hereby judge Laven... Guilty! Guilty of both charges!”

The mummies standing at attention all around the tomb mumbled and moaned in unison and applauded. It was as if it was a celebration, and the atmosphere was jubilant. As for myself, I wasn't feeling it. The anubis was lit up. She was very pleased with herself. There was a look of accomplishment on her face. It was punctuated by a very sincere smile of joy. She rose from her throne and slowly walked down the granite steps to where I was being held to kneel. She waved her staff to shoo away the two mummies holding me down. I tried to stand; but with another wave of her wand which glowed and emitted a bright white light, I felt my legs weaken, and I crashed back down on my knees.

“Laven. I sentence you to eternity here in this tomb as my servant.”

I was glaring at her. There was nothing but frustration and anger behind my gaze. I clenched my fists until my knuckles turned white. I grit my teeth and every fiber of my being was ready to lash out. Not a single gesture, subtle or not, seemed to faze this girl though. She was smiling. It was an arrogant smile. Considering how I was feeling, it was very rude. Despite that, she looked happy. Very happy.

“Rejoice mortal. I have deemed to spare your life. You are guilty, but I can tell your heart is pure and just. Simply obey my every command, and you will be treated well. To serve such a divine being, such as I, is an honor only a handful of mortals will ever know.”

This wasn't time to be so carefree. I was in danger. This girl and her servants were in danger. An imminent threat was near, an insane, deranged and bloodthirsty one, but there wasn't a shred of respect she held for me that would allow me to speak to her as an equal.

“Now. For your first duty. My paws are sore, and these girls' hands are so clumsy. I command you to-”

However, I would not give up so easily, “Listen. There's no time. I'm telling you, there are people after me and they're on my trail.”

“They are of no concern. I am in control of this tomb and its monument. Every gate and door, every wall, floor and ceiling. Every trap, big and small. I must admit; my servant is amazing to have made it so far and evade every trap and fall into the one pit trap that leads to this tomb. But your former friends will not be so lucky.”

“Traps? What traps?”

“The spears, the arrows, the rolling boulder, the- Wait. What exactly are you implying by asking, 'what traps?'”

“I walked through the halls above for a good twenty minutes and didn't activate a single trap. I didn't see a monument either. This whole place is buried under layers of rock and sand.”

“No.” She said with her happy expression long gone from her face. “You jest.”

“There wasn't a single trap on the way here. If there were. They all broke-”

I didn't catch anything even I said after that. The only thing I could hear was a buzzing in my ears. A buzz of sheer power. Then there was an explosion. It came from behind. Hunks of marble in all sizes shot out like shrapnel. I found some strength in my legs to instinctively dive forward. I collided with the anubis girl, caught her off guard and knocked her over. With my hands still tied to the pole behind my neck I was laying down on top of the anubis. My face was buried in her bosom, but I didn't have time to enjoy the feeling or warmth as the sound of marble whizzing over my head like bullets froze my heart solid.

“Unhand me at once, you brute! You insolent servant!” At least someone here still had some spirit and resolve left. She struggled to push my weight off of her. She certainty didn't have the strength I'd become accustomed to expect from monsters.

I felt so weak and so low on energy that I could only speak in monotone, “I can't, you sapped my strength.”

She stopped struggling for a moment then her staff shone once more, and I felt my strength return. I immediately sat back up and let her crawl out from under me. She was blushing and fidgeting, and her

eyes darted back and forth. Until she looked behind me, and her face went agape with horror. Tears welling up in her eyes.

I turned to look behind me and saw the marble door which had been there but a moment ago had a large hole blown in it. Around the room, mummies were picking themselves up off the ground. Some were no worse for wear; their facial expressions hadn't even changed despite the turn of events. Some were missing limbs, but not a drop of blood was spilled. A couple of them were already repositioning severed limbs and tying their bandages around to reattach them. Many of the artifacts around the room were damaged, a number of them irreversibly so. It was a complete disaster.

It was just large enough now for someone to walk through. And walk through someone did and then a second. A man wearing white robes, a constant squint, and a debased smile on his face. Beside him appeared a woman. White robe over billowing blue robes. Everything about her indicated she was human or at least looked the part. It was a change of pace. However, this girl was bristling with power. I didn't understand it; I couldn't see it, but I could feel it, and it couldn't be anything other than magic power.

It was Zerin and the fifth of his cronies. He scanned the room, laid his eyes on me and showed me that exaggerated and revolting smile.

Chapter 19

With each step Zerin took, marble pulverized to dust, and pebbles of the once magnificent door were kicked out of the way. The spectacle of gold and finery didn't seem to faze him at all, neither did he seem to have a shred of respect for history or the faintest sympathy for archeologists. His eyes were dead set on me; he only stopped moving forward when he and his goon reached the wall of mummies who had placed themselves between Zerin and the Anubis.

Zerin's voice was still as shrill as ever with its fake and condescending camaraderie, “You are a hard man to find Laven. I'm beginning to think you might detest me.”

“If you haven't gotten the hint already, I haven't been trying hard enough,” I said nearly spitting it out.

The anubis stood tall and bellowed in her commanding voice, “You- you vulgar heathens! Who are you to think of desecrating the tomb of Amenenofru the First?”

She couldn't hide how hysterical she was. There were tears in her eyes even as she was brimming with rage. She was almost barking, or so I thought when she was yelling so fervently that I saw her teeth were very wolf like with very prominent canines. Zerin noticed her for the first time, and the look on his face writhed as though she had struck a nerve.

“Heathen? HEATHEN?” Zerin screamed. “You dare calls God's most faithful a heathen, you mangy mutt?”

“Mutt?” The anubis shook as she weathered the abuse. “Mangy?”

She stomped forward a few steps on a warpath until the mage acted. With a flick of her curved wooden staff, an invisible force slammed into the anubis or at least against some barrier. She wasn't hit directly, but she slid backwards, yelped in surprise and kept going further than where I was still kneeling. The expressionless look on the mage's face furrowed a little; it looked like she had expected more from that attack.

“You. You dare. You dare raise your hand against a divine being like me?” If the anubis was still calm somewhere deep down inside, I'm sure even that was fading away.

“No monster such as you is one of God's faithful.” Zerin declared with a frightening wide eyed face.

This was all happening because of me, so I needed to speak up and turn it back to me before things escalated and got out of hand too quickly,

“Funny for you to say that Zerin. You don't seem to be above getting their help.” I said pointedly.

“They are repentant.” Zerin said, his face returning to its normal disgusting self when he seemed to have been reminded I was present. “The shamed. Those seeking forgiveness and salvation from the Almighty.”

“Why would a monster-”

“Surely you have learned by now Laven. There are three types of monsters. There are those that are created. First: Spawned from the abyss, the darkness God cast off from the world when he separated light and dark.” Zerin held up a finger and then another for each point. “Second: those that are born from the unholy union of man and monster. Third: Women who turn into monsters.”

I knew exactly where he was going.

“Yes. That's the face!” Zerin said excitedly. “Talking with you is so much fun. You understand everything so quickly. They are the third, but they are still sane. They remember being human. They are the repentant and wish forgiveness from God. Their forms became twisted through misfortune or their own folly. They will hunt their own kind in repentance, so when they are put to rest their souls can be saved from being thrown into The Abyss.”

“You're insane, Zerin. Guilting those girls into doing your work for you. There's no way anyone with a shred of humanity could do that.”

“Humanity? You accuse me of a lack of humanity? You openly consort with monsters; you even play your 'games' with them.” He said while pointing at my arms tied up.

I flustered, “This isn't what it looks like.”

Zerin ignored me and continued, “We're a lot alike, you and I. Just two opposite sides of the same coin.” I was going to speak up, but he wasn't done, “Just like The Abyss and the Light. You spread the

sickness, and I stop it. Even Ceerly. You didn't kill him. I was two days from Brun and hunting you when I realized it. You had tricked me. Ceerly was still alive in that wood and guilty. You are so very vile."

"Yeah. I'm a regular weasel. Donald is long gone one way or the other. But you're wrong if you think I am like you at all."

"Deny it all you wish Laven. You are a test sent by the Almighty to test my faith. It was preordained that I must defeat you. A shadow of myself!"

The anubis howled, "Enough!" It was so loud and carried so much force that the granite walls shook. She brought her staff down onto the ground which rang with the force of a thunderclap. "I shall not tolerate perjury in my court!"

Zerin was furious about being interrupted, "Stay out of this you flea ridden-"

"There will be no lies in my court. I am the divine judge of the living and the dead."

She thrust her staff forward; the scales leveled until they point toward Zerin. The left scale plummeted as though an invisible weight had been placed there.

"It is I who attend, 'the weighing of the heart'. I judge you and your ally guilty. Your hearts are heavy, and your sins are great."

"I am to be judged by God alone, not some false god like yourself! Now get your filthy minions and yourself out of my way. Hand over Laven, and I may let you all live."

"This man is now my servant. His crimes have been judged, and his punishment dealt. There is nothing you can say nor do to reverse that!" She pointed her staff toward me; but unlike before, the right scale weighed down by some invisible force. "His heart's weight is light. Never have I seen a heart weigh so much less than a feather of truth." She became despondent for a moment. She lost her focus as though seeing something far away, "except once."

And there I saw it. Sitting on the right scale was a shining white feather. It looked so ethereal; its existence so transient and fragile. I did not see anything on the other scale, and I was at a loss to what was happening. What sort of magic was this? I hadn't any clue.

“If you won't hand the heathen Laven to me, then we shall have to take him by force. Anna. End them all but leave Laven alive.”

“Yes sir.” The mage finally spoke. Her voice was a cocktail of emotion. It was monotone, but it carried with it anger and sadness, frustration and resignation.

The mage's staff bristled with electricity. Whips of lightning flickered off it, and it quickly got more and more severe. The anubis stood tall and did nothing. Her face radiated confidence. Zerin stood pointing his finger toward us shouting his unintelligible commands. The mummies had begun to move. They slowly marched and formed ranks between Zerin and the anubis. I was still tied up.

Anna the Mage placed her hand on the head of her staff and drew it back. A crackle of electricity formed an arch between them as all that power started to form in the palm of her hand. A ball of white hot plasma rested there until she threw it forward as a beam of light which roared and split the stagnant air of the tomb. That terrible energy blasted into the crowd of mummies and threw up a suffocating cloud of dust. I had a hard time breathing, and I nearly choked being unable to cover my own mouth. An explosion had torn many of the mummies apart, but like before they started to stand back up with missing body parts. Those that were still in one piece formed a front rank and pushed forward while the others started putting themselves back together.

The mummies marched forward and tossed out their bandages like lassos. They grabbed hold of both Zerin and Anna, but neither of them seemed concerned at all. With good reason. The bandages tying Anna suddenly burst into flames, and the crackle of electricity followed those flames back to their sources, igniting them as well. Those girls were so dry; the flames were fierce, but even as they burned they still marched onward undeterred.

“They're going to get killed like that.” I said in a panic.

“They are already dead.” The anubis replied. “But they will lay down what unlife they have to protect this tomb.”

“Aren't you going to do anything? They're not going to handle that on their own. You could at least untie me!”

She was already concentrating, a circle of lights rotating below her with strange hieroglyphic symbols. They were white but slowly turned red until they shone a brilliant crimson like her eyes. Just as

suddenly as the circle appeared it burst and flew upwards as a thousand particles of light that drifted into the air and disappeared. I wasn't sure what the point of that display was until I saw a change in Zerin and Anna's state; their legs had suddenly buckled from underneath them.

“Just one of a countless number of curses at my disposal. There are spirits beyond this world that resented their own weakness. An offering of the strength they covet for just a moment and they will gladly do your bidding and curse the living.”

Closer and closer the mummies approached. Their arms held outwards like monsters from an old horror movie. They were fragile but strong. They fell apart easily but could just as easily put themselves back together. If they got to the two of them and surrounded them; that may well be the end of them.

“Almighty God in Heaven!” Zerin shouted, “Deliver your faithful from harm!”

Holding a strange symbol into the air, Zerin made his plea with his god. The symbol was a horizontal line; halfway down there were two sideways Vs that made a diamond like image. With just that gesture alone, Anna rose to her feet and, soon after, so did Zerin. The anubis was shocked and taken off guard. The mummies approached closer but were once again thrown aside and cast up into the air in all directions. They each hit the ground with sickening thuds and cracks as limbs dislocated, fell off and broke. There was an open path between us and the two of them now, and neither of them hesitated.

Leaping forward and being propelled on a current of air behind her, the mage clashed with the anubis from about twenty meters away in an instant. The force of the crash pushed the anubis back toward the rear of the tomb as their staffs clashed. She let out a yelp while the mage grimaced with a look of unadulterated hatred on her face. I was left all alone on the platform now. Unguarded and still tied up.

I watched as Zerin walked through the hole in the defense. He walked over the pieces of all the mummies, even kicking their limbs out of the way. The mummies didn't even protest; they merely continued crawling after their limbs even after they had been so cruelly treated like garbage.

“Laven, Laven, Laven.” He said condescendingly shaking his head as he approached.

I got off my knees and stood tall to face off against him. He climbed the stairs to the platform, and we stared each other down.

"It was clever of you to try to escape into this desert, but you're a prize too valuable to give up. A little desert heat is nothing. Not with Anna's cool gusts of wind. They are ever so relaxing."

"Gusts of wind?"

"Yes. That face again! I love it. That's right. It is too bad it gave us away, but it also seemed to cause you and your fire lizard problems."

"The bridge. Then the others-"

"They will corner her eventually. If they can't, they'll hold her back long enough for me to be done with you."

Zerin pulled out an ornate wavy dagger with the same religious symbol on its pummel as his pendant. He then waved it back and forth.

"Anna will deal with your new bitch in short order. Before that, I will make you confess all your sins. Tis my specialty after all. Extracting confessions from the bodies of the unwilling."

Zerin's sick and disgusting smile was twice as bad now, and he was giving out an equally disgusting and sick laugh. The anubis was right. Zerin is sick.

"You're even worse than I imagined, Zerin. I thought you were bad enough convincing those poor girls to do your dirty work."

"It is not indentured servitude. Neither is that girl a monster."

"Then why would she-?"

"Her mother was a simple folk, a common woman. A woman who suffered terrible scarring burns. Rather than face her test from God, she despaired when her husband sought comfort in other women. She found and allowed demonic energy to overtake her body and blast away her soul. That woman died and a succubus took her place. She traded fullness and enlightenment for a husk, for empty beauty far beyond her imagination. She then bewitched her husband, and they wrapped themselves in debauchery. So Anna ran, like the good child she is. She told the Church, and they rescued her. If she had stayed, those foul energies would eventually corrupt her... but her parents were both long gone, down beneath the earth in the caverns of

demons before they could face judgment. Her family was destroyed. By monsters. But the little girl had talent. So much faith and righteousness as a young child. She also had the spark of a mage. How else could a sweet and innocent child have felt the demonic energy in the next room? She held onto that righteous hate. She let it mold her power till she would get revenge on the creatures that ruined her and her loved ones."

"Because you made monsters out of them."

"Don't you see Laven? Monsters and men. We are just predator and prey! Your soul will be devoured eventually. If it hasn't already. I will make you understand, and then I will let you face God and final judgment."

Zerin's speech was interrupted by a body thrown just to the right of us. Anna had been sent flying through the air, hit the platform and tumbled a few times before landing back on her feet. She threw up a barrier of electricity which blocked a black cloud of smoke that exploded on impact with it. Zerin frowned and looked concerned after watching Anna be thrown across the room. Behind me, the anubis was marching toward us all, waving her staff in the air and preparing more curses and spells as the energy crackled, and a dark miasma billowed around her. She was looking angry, very angry. Anna threw her own barrage of lightning at the anubis, and the two of them came to a standstill.

"Of course, her mother would have done what she did. Instead of helping her, you just told her suffering was natural. Isn't that only better for you? So long as she obeys and keeps paying her respects hoping to be saved?"

"For the price of her immortal soul! This is why you have to be made to understand."

"No. I understand already. I understand, but I don't accept it. It's you who can't understand how anyone could disagree. She wanted what she thought would make her happy. You didn't care about that at all!"

"That lust made them abandon their daughter."

"Because you told her that they were monsters. You made her frightened and angry toward her own parents. You stole her from them, and they could do nothing but flee for their lives. Tried as they might, if they wanted her back, she wouldn't be a victim for you to raise

into your lackey but a bargaining chip, a hostage to used and disposed of."

Zerin's face was so full of fervor, but that was gone now. Instead his expression had been replaced by one of forlorn resignation. He didn't slump or lose that light in his eyes, so he did not see himself being defeated. Rather, he seemed to have given up something else entirely.

"I believe that there is no soul which cannot be saved. But I must admit that I have met them and have dealt with them. I hoped I could make you understand, but instead I see I will have to end it here."

"I may be new here, but no world works the way you think it does, and you cannot make it work the way you want either."

"You're unarmed and defenseless, Laven. I see no way for you to-"

Zerin was still busy proselytizing as always, so I took the initiative. I lunged forward and caught him by surprise; he flinched on reflex instead of defending himself. He never struck me as a fighter. Each one of his victims was defenseless or defeated for him. The pole my hands had been tied to was not short like it should be; it was long. Long enough for me to swing my shoulder over and crack the inquisitor in the side of the head with the gold rod. There was a loud clang as the rod cracked against his skull and sent him reeling. Stunned from the first blow, he raised he arms to cover his head; I took the opportunity with a free foot and kicked up with all my strength right between his legs. I planted the tip of my steel toed boot.

Zerin hit the floor faster than a sack of potatoes, and on that floor, he rolled around in pain. He wouldn't be getting back up anytime soon.

"Couldn't see a way? You need a better imagination Zerin."

His voice was very high pitched, but he managed to squeeze out a few more words, "Anna. Quit playing around. End it now. Now!"

While Zerin and I had been talking Anna and the anubis had been having their magic duel nearby and all over the tomb. They both looked exhausted, but Anna's head perked up when he screamed at her.

“Then... I'm allowed?” She said with a toothy grin spreading across her face.

Anna's calm demeanor broke down in an instant. From her sleeves, she pulled out a long piece of paper. A scroll. She tore it in half, and the magic power hidden within exploded outwards. Golden rings of light launched outwards from the cloud of magic particles and latched themselves onto each of the anubis's limbs and her neck. She had been exhausted and caught off guard. She struggled against the bindings, but she was firmly held in place with her limbs stretched out as if she had been held to a giant 'X'. The anubis's eyes were wild and furious; her gaze alone was enough to cause the gold rings to start disintegrating into clouds of gold particles.

They were dissolving nowhere near fast enough. Anna had started collecting a lot of magical energy. She kept collecting it until thin streams of blood started to trickle from her nose, ears, eyes and mouth. Even the anubis was alarmed to see her going into such a state. The only one that wasn't surprised was Zerin, still on the floor but wearing a very disturbing and demented smile on his face. More so than usual and that's what scared me.

A large ball of plasma was forming all around Anna, and she was collecting it into an ever growing orb in front of her. Her signature attack, but it was getting much larger than before. Zerin had started laughing, and it infectiously spread to Anna. She looked like such a simple girl. I would not have thought a face like that was capable of becoming so twisted. I suppose Zerin had his way with her for quite some time. Whatever sickness he had he passed it onto her. It was pitiable, but it was not the time to stand idly by.

The orb started fluctuating and pulsating; crackling with energy that was barely being contained. The anubis was still struggling and wouldn't be able to escape. A terrified look on her face told me just how powerful that attack was, and it looked ready to strike at any moment. My hands were still tied up, the mummies were still putting themselves back together, Zerin was rolling the floor behind me laughing hysterically like a madman, Anna was in the distance powering up and the anubis was to my front about ten meters away.

There was only one thing I could do.

Dashing forward, I sprinted as fast as I could and put my shoulder on a collision course with the anubis and struck her shoulder, and she winced in pain from the blow. I hadn't expected to hit

something so solid. She was smaller than me and a girl; but of course, she was being held in place by some force. Instead of another person I felt as if I had run right into the side of a vending machine. She still tipped over though and fell over onto the ground. The gold rings binding her smashed into a million pieces on contact with the cold granite floor.

I came to a complete stop, standing where she was before. I didn't have to wait to be told what that meant. When I turned around and faced Anna I was met with a blinding light. Faster than my eye could follow or my body react, a spear of light shot toward me and hit me in the stomach. I was blown off my feet and carried through the air until I reached the far wall of the tomb. I smashed against the wall so hard it actually cratered and cracked. This time for sure I felt almost every bone in my body break and shatter. Gravity peeled me off the wall, and I tumbled down on top of the throne and kept going down the stairs till I landed on my back at the bottom.

No mercy was spared for the likes of me; I didn't pass out at all, and I felt the excruciating pain of every single broken bone in my body. I tried to see if I could move my body, but I couldn't. I tried propping myself on my elbows, but the pain was too much. I couldn't move my legs; I couldn't even feel them. My head was still ringing, and I couldn't hear a thing. I had trouble keeping my eyes open, but when my hearing returned I saw someone run over and kneel down beside me.

"-ven!"

Someone was calling out to me.

"La-"

It was definitely someone trying to call out my name. Then that someone cradled my head, lifted me off the ground and shook me. It hurt like hell.

"Watch it," I could barely speak louder than a whisper. "That really hurts."

That voice was almost choking, choking back on tears, "Laven... Why?"

I recognized that voice. It wasn't as arrogant. Neither was it rude, demanding or commanding, but it was definitely the same. It was the anubis. A fluffy paw and soft pads were holding my head up, and she wrapped one of her small paws around one of my hand and was holding it up.

I barely had the strength or consciousness to speak, but I had to ask, “Why? Why what?”

While I asked I looked down at my own body. Right through the leather armor there was a hole in my stomach. I could actually see the stone floor on the other side. If a white light wasn't shining on the edges, I would clearly be looking at my own intestines right now. Except for the blood leaking from my fractured skull there wasn't a drop of blood or guts spilling out either. When I watched it for a moment, I could swear that the hole was growing larger very slowly. Maybe at a rate of a millimeter a minute. Maybe it really was a kind of plasma.

“Oh. That.” I said dryly. “I guess that's why I can't feel my legs.”

“What would possess you to do that? You idiot. You imbecile!” I felt a drop of salty water land on my cheek. She was crying.

“Hey. Listen. I can't fight her. There's no way I could. If you died, I'd be next anyways.”

“Such an attack... I could most definitely-”

“Hey. I thought you liked the truth. Don't lie to me at a time like this.”

“A master is supposed to protect her servants!”

“I don't remember ever agreeing I'd be your-” I coughed violently and spat up a good amount of blood.

“Laven! Don't move. Remain still.” The anubis was frantic.

“I'm getting...weaker... That light is eating me up. I got a beating heart... it's feeding it blood.” It was getting harder to keep my eyes open, but I still kept trying to reassure her, “Don't... waste the time I b-...bought.”

“No! Hold on, I'll heal you.”

I felt my eyelids getting heavier.

“Don't leave,” Her voice was very soft now. “Don't leave me. I don't desire this solitude anymore.”

“You weren't alone-”

“They are servants of the Pharaoh just like me. But they are just shells. Husks. I coveted someone. Someone living. Someone alive to converse with. That's all I desired.”

“I wanted... To keep my promise. With someone. I wanted... To go home. But I'm an idiot.” I coughed again, but only a little blood came up this time. “I get myself in trouble. Instead of looking out for myself. Besides. This is all my fault that I'm here. You're not... to blame.”

In the distance, I heard Zerin shouting and screaming. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but when I looked, and my eyes focused I saw that he had risen to his feet and was yelling at Anna who was on all fours, a small pool of blood beneath her.

I did make out a little what he was screaming, “Again! You have to do it again. You have my blessings. I pardon you. Just finish them off! God will forgive you for everything. Everything! Just do it! Even if it kills you! DO IT!”

Anna pushed herself to her feet and fixed her eyes on the anubis, and she started to crackle with energy again. The whites of her eyes had been dyed with her blood oozing from her tear ducts. Her teeth had been dyed red as well, and her face was like that of a wild beast. A mad beast. Her own robes were disintegrating from the energy she was forcing herself to collect. She was losing the youthful pink flush of her skin, and her features started appearing sunken and weary. She was going to do it again. But the anubis didn't budge. She shielded my body with her own.

The stupid girl. You're wasting everything I did for you. Would you rather have it been you who died that badly?

Another ball of plasma started forming, but it broke into pieces. Anna fell to one knee but not because she had exhausted herself. A hand had grabbed her and pulled her down. A mummy had crawled up the steps with only one arm and held onto her. Then another latched on and then another. Zerin panicked and tried to pull them off, but soon he too was grabbed by many hands that pulled him to his knees. The mummies in various states of having fallen apart snuck up and ambushed the two. When they managed to pull one off, another took its place. Anna's concentration had been broken, but that didn't last forever. Her magics soon began to try to incinerate the mummies one

by one.

One lone mummy with her legs and arms still intact stood tall over the scene. She looked right at the anubis, and they exchanged gazes. She then slowly pointed upwards toward the ceiling. What did she mean? I didn't know, but the anubis seemed to understand. She clutched me tighter, and her eyes had turned into full blown water works. She was wailing.

It was the last thing I saw as I felt my eyelids became too heavy to keep open. I could still hear; I heard the anubis cry for me to open my eyes. I tried to clench my fist tighter to say I was still alright, but I wasn't sure I had the strength to do even that. Gradually my body was losing feeling as I began to go numb. My whole body started to feel like what you'd experience when one of your legs falls asleep.

I definitely heard one last thing loud and clear. I heard a howl. A piercing wolf's howl. If I wasn't already bleeding out of my ears, I would be now because my eardrums would have ruptured. I could still feel the vibrations. There was a rumbling, a crashing; a cloud of dust, dirt and sand erupted, and I could taste its grittiness even with the overpowering taste of iron in my mouth. The long howl ceased, and I got a feeling of claustrophobia and felt another body lay on top of me and hugged me tightly.

The rumbling came to a stop; everything became very silent. Except for one solitary voice. It was less a voice and more of a whimper. A crying girl's voice.

She was pleading, “Please, Pharaoh. Please. Forgive me. I failed you. I waited here and guarded you for so long. I waited so long for you. I did everything I could for you. So please forgive me for this and forgive me for asking too much. I'm asking for just one thing. Help me. Help me please. I don't want to be alone. Pharaoh please!”

My heart was still beating, so it stung me to hear this girl crying and begging for help and forgiveness. I couldn't lift a finger, but I felt warm, fuzzy and soft paws clinging to me. I could still faintly feel those claws dig into my skin. Tears soaked my shirt. I couldn't say or do a thing. No matter how much I held on or how much I struggled I was going away somewhere. I felt that way until the moment I separated from the pain, and I drifted away.

Chapter 20

My eyes suddenly shot open as if I had realized mid-sleep that I had forgotten a paper I was supposed to write that morning. A powerful thumping in my chest clouded my sense of hearing, and my head felt as though it was about to burst like a balloon. The only thing I understood right now was that I was in a panic. I gradually got my breathing under control; and as my eyes adjusted, I found myself staring up at a bleach white stucco ceiling. Rolling on my side, I saw an alarm clock blinking unerringly at twelve o'clock. A soft morning light was pouring in through the half open blinds of a nearby window. Then I realized I was laying on my back on a soft bed wearing normal clean clothing. I peered over at my abdomen and saw no luminescent white rung hole that went straight through.

I asked aloud to myself. “Where am I? Do I live here?”

Kicking my legs off the bed, I groggily put my feet on the floor and stood up, but I immediately fell over sideways, failed to break my fall and hit my face on the carpeted floor. I was stunned for a moment. As I stood back up I realized that the room was tilted at a twenty degree angle. Something wasn't right after all. The tilted room only added to my confusion; I also felt like I was forgetting something very important.

I would have to allow myself time to remember what it was later because as I pulled the blinds up and looked outside I saw some sort of marsh, blue skies above without a cloud in sight, a sun hanging lazily above the expansive fields of green reeds and perfectly crystal clear water. What was this room I assumed was mine doing crashed landed in a random marsh?

There was something I was forgetting. I just didn't know what it was. It felt safe in here, that bed was rather inviting and I did feel incredibly tired. However, none of that overpowered this feeling there was something I was forgetting. It was such a powerful feeling; I wasn't just going to sit around and ignore it any longer. This wasn't the time to be resting or slacking off; there was a mystery to be solved.

My eyes were drawn naturally to the water which was very clear, but I still couldn't see the bottom. Just how long were these reeds that the sediment they were rooted in couldn't be seen? I almost thought to try swimming to whatever shore I could find and search for answers. If there wasn't land to stand on, I could hold myself up by the reeds at the very least. I almost did, until I heard something pushing

through the forest of green towards my apartment. Whatever was approaching emerged from the forest of reeds before I could cower.

From the reeds appeared an archaic river boat. It was made of fine polished cedar and ivory. It looked very familiar. The boat glided peacefully toward my front door and came to a gentle stop. I sensed that something was very off, but I didn't feel any hostility either. It was almost too convenient for such a thing to happen. It was as odd as the unshakable feeling that I had forgotten something. I didn't know if this boat was going to wait forever, so I boarded it carefully. It didn't even rock after taking on my weight, and it disembarked, retreating back into the reeds. Just as easily as the reeds were pushed aside and flattened, they readily went back into place. Maybe the reeds simply came into existence when I wasn't looking.

“I bid you welcome, traveler.”

A regal and dignified voice of a man greeted me. I did not know from where, but the voiced sounded close. Very close. As I spun around and tried to find this man he laughed jovially. It was then I spotted him. A well built, muscular, tall, tanned and pleasant looking man was sitting on a small throne under a white canopy on the aft quarter of the boat. He wore a gold and jewel embroidered shendyt and an elaborate head dress just as fine with gold bangles on his ankles and wrists. The man was the spitting image of a stereotypical caricature of Ancient Egypt. His face looked familiar. I don't know why, but I had the unshakable feeling I had seen that gentle and peaceful face before.

“Come. Have a seat my friend. I humbly ask you to be my guest. I have much I wish to talk about.”

He didn't seem bothered by my bewilderment and lack of proper manners. I hesitantly approached and nearly tripped over a chair of the utmost quality and extravagance that I could have sworn wasn't there a moment ago. So there I stood, throwing a skeptical look toward the chair instead of seating myself. I watched the man closely as he drank what smelled like wine from a container shaped like a vase. When he laid his eyes on me again he didn't seem particularly insulted. I had refused to seat myself.

“You'll have to forgive me for not getting comfortable. There's somewhere else I need to be,” I said, finally speaking up.

“A word of caution: Your memory may not return as soon as

you wish it to. 'If' it ever returns, so do not strain yourself needlessly."

"What the? I didn't say anything about not knowing where I was going."

"I've been here much longer than you have, and I knew much more about it before I arrived than you do."

"Sorry, but I don't care. If you're looking to help, could kindly point me in the right direction out of here? I would appreciate that."

"There is only one place to go here, traveler. And it is not an exit. If you will not or cannot go there, then I will keep you company. For I myself cannot go there."

"I've only got once place to go, and that's out of here. I'm going home."

"For all who come here, this is their new home. The afterlife."

Afterlife? That word stuck in my chest like a sharp knife that twisted in my chest.

"Are you saying I'm dead?"

"I am not sure. I felt the sudden appearance of a ba. A feeling I have not felt in a very long time."

"A ba?"

"A ba is that which can walk between the lands of the living and the dead. A ba is a part of all men and even gods. In gods, it is strongest and free from the mortal coil of a physical form. They also radiate with power, so after feeling one appear after so long, I followed it to the source and found you."

"You're not making any sense. Just tell me how to get out of here."

The man's eyes widen in disbelief for but a moment before they closed in realization, "Yes. You must forgive me. It has been so long since I last had the pleasure of simple conversation. Of course, you would not be familiar with such things. It appears your heart has yet to reunite with you in this place."

"And what exactly is this place?" I pointed all around me,

“'This' is the afterlife?”

The man sighed wistfully, “No. I am afraid this is merely a stop on the journey to the realm where the gods and righteous dead reside, The Land of the Two Fields. This is merely the river one must travel to reach it. I am familiar with it, but even I have never sailed all its waters. No one save the immortal gods could do so.”

“So you're a prisoner here? And that makes me one too?”

“That is correct, traveler.”

The man reached into an urn that did not exist beside him a moment ago and pulled out a handful of dried figs. I could have sworn that in the time it took me to blink it had decided just as quickly not to exist.

“A great ship used to sail these waters. It was a brilliant gold; it was as if one sun with the souls of the worthy dead sailed into the sun on the horizon.” He ate the first fig and continued. “I watched it sail across these waters many times.” He ate the second. “As time went on, fewer and fewer souls rode upon its deck,” He finally devoured the final fig. “Until eventually not a soul rode upon it. It was not long after till I ceased to see it sail. It has not to this day.”

“And now you're going to tell me what you make of that?” I was getting a little rude and impatient.

The man seemed to take it in stride, “You already know. You'll understand that when you remember.”

Great. So it was going to be one of those types of conversations. A cryptic riddlesmith and mysterious stranger sailing across the river that is the afterlife which seems to take delight and is entertained by messing with my head. Maybe I would have been better off just swimming.

“In the land of the living,” he continued at last, “there was once a kingdom that is no more. No doubt you have seen it with your eyes? A barren wasteland devoid of all life?”

“No. I don't. I have no idea what-”

I shut up immediately as I felt like I had smacked upside the back of the head. In rapid succession, a series of images came rushing into my consciousness. A desert wasteland, a rocky canyon.

The last few images slowed to a crawl. I was throwing my own hand toward a girl who was desperately trying to grab hold of me. At least she looked mostly like a girl, she was beautiful, and she had such a face of genuine desperation and tears welling up in her eyes. Those eyes. With golden irises and black pupils which were slits like a reptile. And that the hand she was desperately holding out toward me was also reptilian, red, and armored as if she was-

"Ah! Fucking hell!" I screamed as I clutched my head and bent over in extreme pain.

The man was calmly sipping away at his wine, "Your ba is not strong enough to serve as a vessel for your heart. You will only cause yourself pain if you try too hard to hold onto certain memories. Such things will cease to cause you pain here when you learn to let them go."

I grit my teeth, and the pain only intensified. Image after image replaced my sight in rapid succession. I couldn't hold onto a single one of them; it was like trying hold water inside a mesh net.

The man still didn't seem concerned as he continued drinking, "You are here for a reason. You should not concern yourself with the cause. This place has made you forget so it would not cause you this pain."

Another image crossed into my mind and held still for a few moments as it hung in my vision for a few seconds. Another girl, another gorgeous face. That face flashed in my mind: mischievous, arrogant, angry and stoic. The last, and not least, she was crying. Tears were streaming down her face, and she looked like she was calling out in despair. Something was different about this girl. Black wolf ears on top of her head in the absence of human ones on the side, with the white of fur lining the inside and the little white tufts sticking out at the-

"Argh!" I cried out in a blood curdling scream.

With an even more severe pain in my stomach I lost all sensation in my lower half and collapsed writhing onto the deck of the boat. That pain only lasted for a moment, and the sensation in my body's lower half soon returned to me. Why was this happening to me?

"If you have grown tired of your struggles, I wish to continue our conversation," the man said, sounding irritatingly uninterested in my suffering.

He finally finished his wine and returned his full attention onto me once again. At the same time, the boat emerged from the forest of reeds onto a wide river. On each shore, there were signs of life and civilization, but there wasn't a single person. Mud huts and farmhouses were lined on each side of the river, but there wasn't a sign of single person living in them. Large monuments and massive buildings built of columns made a city far off in the distance beyond the river. It seemed the spitting image of another place from another time.

Just as suddenly as the boat had sailed into this serene and eerie scene it vanished. Tall walls of stone had appeared on each side that stretched up into the heavens. The blue cloudless sky seemed so far away now. There wasn't a drop of water, but the boat still seemed to sail hovering just above craggy ground.

"It was a rich kingdom, a powerful kingdom. But now I see this kingdom is nothing and doesn't even have a name." The man looked around with despairing eyes.

"I know this place. I was here not long ago." I got a little excited that I was seeing something that seemed familiar and actually made sense.

Like a mirage the whole scene wavered and distorted in an optical illusion that gave way, and the boat returned to sailing down the river.

"Hold on. Take me back. I need to get off."

"I would not advise that traveler. These waters are not safe. The dead can get lost in them and fall prey to the creatures that lurk under the surface and under the light."

"And how the hell do you know all this? You can knock off the big and mighty holier than thou act. Just who the hell are you?" I hissed.

"Of course. You must forgive me for forgetting something so simple. In life, I was used to being known by all." He stood up; his eyes level with mine. "I am Bebiankh Buneb-" he began his introduction.

A word fluttered through my empty mind.

"Amenenofru the First," I said plainly, as though my tongue were possessed and spoke for me.

Once again, the searing pain of red hot pokers being pushed into my brain assailed me. I held my head in my hands and pressed down as hard as I could to try to keep everything in there together and in one piece. Another scream escaped from my lips, and I feel to me knees again.

"-And the Last" He said trailing off at the end of his introduction.

Up until now he had kept up an air of nobility and wisdom, but now this man's face was astonished.

"How is it that you know that name?" He asked gravely. "I am sure that there is none living nor dead nor rock eternal that knows that name."

The man walked over and picked me up by my shirt collar, shook me, glared at me and demanded answers. He was strong, so very strong. He lifted me off my feet with ease.

"You're... A Pharaoh. You have.... have a tomb hidden in-" I barely managed to say while being violently shook with a pounding headache.

"How do you know this?" His voice and eyes were getting wild.

"Because... I was... there."

The Pharaoh let go, and I collapsed back down onto the ground. I was sore on impact, but it was nothing compared to the pain bouncing around inside my skull. While I writhed in agony he paced around the boat in deep thought. It was opposite from his behavior before.

"You don't read Old Kingdom. There is no way you could. You are not a native; I can tell that much just looking at you and your strange apparel, so how would you know that name traveler?"

The pain, powerlessness and frustration had pushed me to my breaking point, "Didn't you just tell me to stop trying to remember? How about you fuck off?"

"This is an important matter. More important than you. If you refuse to cooperate..."

With just one hand he leaned over, grabbed me by the throat, lifted me off the ground and then walked over to the edge of the boat. He held me dangling off the side; his grip suffocated and crushed my throat. I grabbed onto his arm and tried to hold myself up, but I hardly had the strength.

“How is it that you know that name?” The Pharaoh repeated with a dire tone in his voice.

“Enough Amenenofru. Let him go.” Another voice, a female voice, it was deadpan and lacked any emotion, but it was familiar.

We both looked over together and saw a girl had appeared on the boat. My eyes widened, and memories came flashing back into my head.

“The... Anubis.” I said croaking.
“I remember that voice.” The Pharaoh said.

“Put him down Amenenofru. Your actions are unbecoming of royalty.” Her eyes had intense focus, and her words were pointed and carried power in them.

The Pharaoh hesitated, but he complied only a few seconds later and brought me back onto the boat and let me go. Having barely any breath left my lungs, my legs buckled, and I collapsed once more onto the deck.

“So, you still exist?” the Pharaoh said, his voice sounded like he was greeting an old friend.

“I only exist here as a part of my whole. I have come here for him,” She pointed one of her claws toward me.

He looked down at me, “So you were in my tomb? This is surprising. After you showed me what has become of my kingdom, I cannot deny it any longer. What I don't understand is how you managed.” He looked back at her, “What is more surprising still is an anubis has come into the Land of the Dead to retrieve a human-”

A loud slap broke the silence surrounding the otherwise serene scene around the boat gently gliding down the river. The anubis had stepped up and hit the Pharaoh hard across the face with her right paw. It was strong enough to push that strong man's head over his shoulder.

“This man is not yet deceased. I will not forgive even you if you try to kill or harm his ba,” She said calmly.

I expected the proud and regal Pharaoh to react violently, but he merely rubbed his cheek and replied, “Not dead?” he asked skeptically. “Then how can his ba wander freely? No. A more interesting question is, 'how did you find him here?'”

She remained silent.

A look of realization spread across the Pharaoh's face, “Ah. So that is how it is? What did he do for you to do something so outrageous?”

“He saved my life. If I do nothing he will lose his own because of what he was willing to sacrifice for me. I will not allow a debt like that to go unpaid.”

“You would compromise your immortality to do that? If you fail-”

“I will not.”

“If he ever dies-”

“He will not.”

The Pharaoh's serious face crumbled after a few seconds, and he broke out into laughter.

“Shoshanah. You've changed. And I don't just mean your form. To think that you would share your life force with a mortal to save his life?”

“This form is now beyond my control now, but I have become accustomed to it and even taken a liking to it.”

“That does not answer my second question.”

“I am merely the ba, a part of the whole; I possess no knowledge why I decided to take such drastic measures, but I am positive that his wound is serious and no ordinary magics can heal it. That is all.”

“I think I understand what your heart desires well enough, Shoshanah.”

The Pharaoh smiled knowingly and mischievously at the anubis whose eyebrows furrowed in puzzlement at what he was talking about.

"Excuse me." I said interrupting this cryptic exchange. "What the hell is going on?"

"You need not worry yourself any longer, Traveler," the Pharaoh said with kindness returning to his speech. "I understand what has happened, and I forgive you. I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me as well."

"Maybe after you go and soak your head in the river."

He laughed jovially, "If it will make amends, perhaps I might." He put on a genuine smile and continued, "You truly are defiant and have no fear in challenging those much stronger than you are, do you? Yes. I will trust you with my final wishes." He turned back to the anubis, "I wish to speak to him for just a little longer."

The anubis nodded and stood by silently.

"Traveler. The truth is that long ago when I was still alive; I reigned over this Kingdom; but not only that, I was its last ruler. Not only that, for the longest time I thought I was the only one left."

"I don't think being dead qualifies you as the last of anything," I added skeptically.

"You are correct. I am not the last one left alive, but I am the last here in The Land of the dead. I now know the last of my kingdom is Shoshanah, the guardian of my royal family and my final resting place. Everything you see here was buried along with my mummy long ago. All of it the provisions I may need on my journey to the realm of the gods."

"But that tomb was destroyed."

"Yes. I have already guessed. This boat. This urn of dried figs and wine, they are all I have left. My musical instruments, my servants, my chariot and everything else disappeared long ago."

My heart felt like it had been struck, and I panicked, "Long ago? How long ago. How long have I been here?"

"Do not fret. If Shoshanah is still trying to save your life, you have not been here long. Time does not flow normally here. I do not

know if I myself have been here for a thousand years or ten thousand. Perhaps I may have been here even longer, but all the same, my kingdom's curse has ruined it beyond salvation."

I repeated what I had heard before, "A cursed land where the sun hates all living things."

"Amenenofru was a kind Pharaoh." The anubis spoke. "He cared for the slaves and poor in his kingdom. He sought to free them and open the land of the dead to everyone of his kingdom. He ended many perpetual wars with our neighbors, much to the delight of many. His ideas were brazen, but it was not the gods who punished him for this; it was his own retainers. They feared the slaves' freedom and what they would do with it. So they wondered, 'who would work the fields or build their monuments and great buildings?' They feared to have them as equals in the paradise of the afterlife the most. They would rather their kingdom be reduced to ashes and in their control. In their folly, my Pharaoh's would be killers handed over one treasure from the royal treasury to Seph, god of destruction. They prayed to all the gods, but only Seph offered his assistance. He was promised one and only one treasure from the Royal Vault, no matter what it was. The traitors brought him the Heart of the River, and he used it to blight the lifeblood of the kingdom. Only the royal family knew of the powers held in those treasures. Their ignorance doomed the land they thought they were saving."

"I was blamed for the plagues that descended on my kingdom. My loyal servants cried out that my reforms angered the gods, and the whole kingdom was being punished. When I was finally assassinated, it was done so with not so much as a cry of outrage. I was buried with my belongings as was any Pharaoh loved or hated. If they didn't my spirit would haunt the living, and I would seek revenge. With no Pharaoh, Seph destroyed the useless gem when it lost its divine protection. You saw how the blight has cut a large scar into the land. I do not know how many thousands of years have passed, but life has still never returned to my lands since it was destroyed. I feel it never will." The Pharaoh became increasingly more distant as the two of them told the story. "The people panicked, chaos took over. The monuments and tombs of Pharaohs past were looted, and the people fled the kingdom or perished in the encroaching sands. After so long, any memory in any descendent of the Forgotten Kingdom has long since faded away."

"Everywhere except inside that tomb of yours?" I asked.

“That is correct.” To hide my curse, there was no ceremony for my burial. The truth behind my betrayal and death was never to be known. No robber ever found it, until now.”

“There are meant to be many Pharaohs that sailed this water.” The anubis said. “With their tombs raided, their bodies destroyed, their valuables looted they soon fade away into nothing.”

“I have sailed for thousands of years, but never once did I find the land of Two Fields. Perhaps I was cursed, but it is ironic that I am the only one left now. With the people and kingdom gone, the gods have long since left as well.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” I had to ask as I sensed the point of this dialogue was approaching.

“Because I want you to understand, traveler. The Forgotten Kingdom is now gone. Except for one thing. The last anubis, Shoshanah. Anubi are spirits from the land of the gods. Guardians of households and their dead. As the royal families disappeared, so did the anubi. When their duty is done, they too return to where the gods reside with their patrons. But I understand now. The reason that I have been here for so long, it is because my tomb was safe, and she still remained in the land of the living for the thousands of years I spent trapped here.”

“As is my duty, my Pharaoh.” The anubis gave a deep and dignified bow. “To prevent the looting of your tomb and to save this man's life. I did my best, but I failed you in my duty because of one moment of thoughtless passion.”

“No. Do not say that Shoshanah. I have sailed these waters for thousands of years, alone, and I have nearly gone mad many times. Neither is your fault. However, now that you are here I can do two last things.”

The anubis perked up, “No. You can't-”

“I can, and I will. Shoshanah, I relieve you of your duties. I no longer wish for you to watch over my tomb. Henceforth, I do not want to see you ever again.”

The anubis visibly shook for just the briefest moment. She had to have been hurt, but she didn't show it on her face. She did not grimace, frown or cry. Only her eyes were cast downward as though something in her had been crushed on the inside.

“Pharaoh, I will not fail you again. I will guard what is left of the tomb you left to me. I will-”

“No. You will not. I strip you of your duties. You are free to do what you wish; but as I commanded, I am to never see you again.”

“Pharaoh? What are you doing?” The anubis's expression and tone still had not changed at all.

“Soon I will be gone from not only the world of the living but also the land of the dead. The land to the gods has been sealed and lost. When I finally cease to exist, I refuse to be responsible for when it is time for you to return to the gods, and you are to be lost for all eternity alone in this cursed place. Second, I owe a debt to this traveler for allowing this meeting to occur. I want you to look after this man instead.”

“I could never serve another.” She said coldly

“This is my last wish. Help this man home. I can no longer tell you what to do, but I still ask you. I have lost my home, as you have lost yours. There will never be another, and I will soon be gone forever. That hopelessness is not your own.”

“What are you trying to do Pharaoh? I am merely indebted to Laven, I simply wish to pay it back. That is all.”

With just that name I felt a torrent of memories flood back into my head. Lost in a strange forest. Being chased. Meeting Rose. Being rescued by her. Traveling together. Brun. Zerin and Donald. The desert wastes. The promise I made with Rose. The anubis and her fighting Zerin for me. Throwing myself in harms way to save her. Her crying face and hoarse cries for me not to leave. It was all too much, and I felt myself blacking out.

“Now you've done it Shoshanah. You said his name, and it awoke his heart.” His words were chastising but playful.

“The ritual has not yet been completed.” Her voice was as deadpan as usual. “How is this possible?”

“His heart is pulling him back... Just how light was it Shoshanah?” The Pharaoh stroked his chin deep in thought. “Not even the land of the dead seems capable of weighing down his heart to this place. He almost did it several times before. I had to stop him as I was not yet finished with him.” He chuckled to himself, “He has more

surprises in him than I gave him credit for."

"I must stop him. If he were to return too early-"

"Then you better hurry and follow him." He was silent for a moment, "Help the traveler. He needs you now." Seeing the anubis hesitate he tried to command her in vain, "Leave. I am burying this empty kingdom and taking it to oblivion with me. You are still only your ba here, Shoshanah. You may not understand what the heart is thinking, but I can see plain as day I am only in the way now. I am not needed anymore."

"No. You cannot do this, Pharaoh."

"The dead should not burden the living. That is why the gods made a separate land for the dead. Am I wrong?"

"No, you are right Pharaoh, but you must reconsider."

"I have no other options, Shoshanah. I have said what I have wanted; now I will seize control of my existence again for one last time. The winds and currents of this place have carried me against my will for thousands of years. For whatever time I have left now, I will not be their play thing anymore."

I was losing all my strength, and I collapsed against the mast of the ship where I held on for dear life. I watched the exchange between the two as the Pharaoh slowly walked over to the side of the ship and turned his back to the river.

The last thing I heard was his final address to me, "Laven... I leave everything to you."

He put his feet together, spread his arms like the wings of an angel and fell backwards over the side of the boat. Immediately there was a splash of water that erupted into the air; it formed a rainbow as it scattered the warm sunlight. For the first time since she had arrived, the anubis showed a genuine look of despair as she screamed in horror. She started to dash toward the side of the boat, but I remembered what the Pharaoh had said about the dangers that lurk beneath the surface. I reacted quickly and mustered all the strength I had and stumbled out to catch the anubis and wrap my arms around her. She flailed and screamed to let her go; but even as my legs lost their strength, and I fell over backwards, I held on tightly and didn't let her go.

My senses began to black out as I fell backwards. This time however, I did not hit my back on the deck of the ship even though I should have. I kept falling as though I was tumbling through empty pitch black space toward some unknown destination. One by one my senses turned off until at last my sense of touch left. Until the very last moment I did not let go of the girl. I had no way of knowing where I was, what direction I was going or where I would end up.

Chapter 21

Falling through perpetual darkness was a terrifying ordeal, and I would have screamed the whole way down, but I had no air to fill my lungs. Perhaps I was still dead. Either way, the only thing I felt was momentum; it was as if a hook and chain lodged in my back was being winched back at incredible speeds. I think I was still technically dead, but I was heading somewhere else very fast.

My mind wandered as I flew through astral space until I was rudely jostled from my train of thought when I felt the familiar feeling of weight. I wasn't being pulled through space anymore, I was laying flat on my back. I was on some cold slab of smooth stone, where I felt glued to it rather than resting on it. Gravity had returned with a vengeance. My vision was still black, and I couldn't see a thing, but I could hear a constant low buzz, a buzz that was slowly fading away and giving way to a voice.

“No. This ley line is not sufficient either. If that is so, this one by necessity is it.”

It sounded like the anubis, and she was very close, as though she was right on top of me. My senses were returning one by one, second was my sense of touch, and I felt a weight pressing down over my heart. I felt pressure and chest compressions. The anubis was pushing down hard on my chest as if she was performing CPR, but even though my eyes were still blind, I thought I saw that darkness turn a subtle shade of green as my ears picked up on another low chime like singing crystal.

“Please work. Please. Laven? Can you hear me? Laven?”

I heard the voice right down near my ear. She was leaning over me while pressing against my chest with both her paws. I felt her locks of hair brush against my nose, I expected to flinch, twitch my nose and even sneeze. My body didn't even budge; the feeling was all in my head. My mind and body still seemed to be disconnected. I wasn't able to open my eyes, nor could I open my mouth to speak. I still couldn’t feel my legs either. What I did feel was a very warm feeling in my chest; it was hot enough to hurt, but it wasn't excruciating, and I was able to drown it out with my flurry of thoughts.

When I thought about pain, I naturally thought of every broken bone in my body. I'm sure I had bruised, ruptured and pulverized organs as well. I should still be squirming in pain, but I didn't feel that

telltale pain of mortality. There was no way to control it, but I felt my chest rise and fall in a shallow rhythm; that meant I had to be alive, and my ribs weren't broken and piercing my lungs. That was a bonus.

It was just as the other anubis had said. I wasn't dead. I only suffered through a near death experience. Before I had blacked out, the anubis did claim she intended to heal me after all. Perhaps my bones were reknit thanks to her, but I still couldn't feel my legs, and my stomach felt warm, tingly with just the smallest hint of excruciating pain.

I felt the paws pushing hard and rhythmically come to a stop and rest on my chest, then a heavier weight collapsed on my chest. I felt smooth skin and silky hair rest against me. Over my heart, I felt something hard yet flexible, like cartilage and a fuzzy tuft of fur.

"His heart is still beating. It is slow, but it has not yet ceased. So why? Why does it not matter how much magic and life force I pour into his vessel? Why does this wound not heal? What manner of diabolical sorcery did that witch use?"

Her voice was hoarse, as though her throat had been parched dry, and it wavered and cracked as though she was fighting back tears or simply had no more left to shed. There still wasn't anything I could do.

"If it doesn't stop soon, it will consume his diaphragm. He'll stop breathing... No... Don't think about that now. I just need to try one of the other ley lines again... But none of them have been wide enough to receive enough life force and magic to counteract this festering raw magic..."

I felt her remain still for a moment, and then her head lifted off my chest in a hurry.

"No. There is one ley line left... But... No. I'll just try the one by the solar plexus again... but..."

She seemed very conflicted about something, but I didn't have long to figure it out before I felt a fresh new pain. My body jolted on its own as if it was hit by an electric shock. My breathing became constricted as my lungs seized up, and my calm breathing sounded like I was trying to breathe through being choked.

"It has consumed to the diaphragm already?" Her voice was frantic; I could picture her fidgeting back and forth. "I am losing

precious time. I will have to... I will have to... It is to save a life. His life. He is alive after all. That is the only difference. You have seen them plenty of times before while before embalming. There is no ground to hesitate. No reason at all..."

My sense of pain dulled once again when the feeling of my diaphragm being eaten away became the new normal. My breathing was still laborious, and I probably didn't have much time left to live. With the pain gone, I noticed instead the sound of rustling clothes. It sounded like it was my clothes; I'm sure I heard the distinctive sound of a belt being unfastened, a zipper being unfastened and the rustle of denim-

"Hiiiiii!" The Anubis let out a very feminine shriek of surprise. "No... Tranquility... Peace... Calm... It is just a medical procedure. Another component of the ritual... Even if the others were more minute- No!" I heard a pair of slaps as though she was smacking her cheeks to steel herself. "Ley line. Just focus on the ley line."

Wait. She wasn't about to do what I thought she was going to do? Was she? The only thought that went through my head was 'not again!' I curled up into the fetal position in my own head and waited for it to happen, but I didn't feel a thing. Had she hesitated? Was a saved from another-

"Still no response." I heard her sniff back her tears and swallow a wail in her throat, but she soon gave a gasp of revelation. "His spine is still severed. Of course! There is no connection from the ley line to the trauma. If I just intensify the Mummy's Curse... Yes. It may just..."

Another chiming and a singing crystal at different tone resonated inside my head. I felt the air become misty and heavy and glow a dull brown-reddish hue on the other side of eyelids. My sense of touch reached new unprecedented heights. I could feel every crevice and crag in the stone I was laying down on; my skin was also feeling increasingly flushed. I was astonished when I started feeling my legs again. I didn't have any control over moving them, but I definitely could feel my legs. What brought me back down to earth was that my groin felt cold, and my jeans felt as though they had been pulled down to my thighs.

"Alright, I will commence channeling this ley line on the count of three. One...Two...Two..." I heard her take many deep breaths... "Three!"

It all happened very quickly, a soft sensation of warm and soft fur pressing down on top of my flaccid penis. It didn't stop there; I felt a pressure as the soft pads of a paw gently pushed down and applied pressure. I still couldn't open my eyes, but I saw fireworks exploding. A rush of pleasure broke down the gates into my mind and blew me away. I wasn't prepared at all for it. I was sensitive, overly sensitive. The feedback from just being touched was too much to handle. I struggled to get back control of my mind, and my unconscious body's back arched on its own and lifted off the ground a few centimeters.

“Please work. Please- Eek!” I heard her let out a loud shriek, pull her paws back for a second before quickly putting them back on. “Why is it growing?”

Oh god please no... Don't tell me she-

“Is...Is it soaking up the life force? I did not know there was an organ which was capable of such a function... Then... That means... It must be working!”

She was elated now. I felt like I was about to die of embarrassment.

“I did not know this organ could increase in size this many times. It has hardened as well... I did not think life force had a possible crystalline structure when solidified.”

I was starting to think I was better off when I was dead.

“Still no change in the trauma... Perhaps this ley line can process more?”

I felt the pressure lift off my member only for a new type of pressure to be applied immediately. I felt the large pad press up against the base of my shaft, and then very slowly and gently I felt her fingers and their soft pads wrap around and hold it tight. It was fuzzy, soft but rough. Following that I felt the other paw wrap around the other half just below the glans. The pressure, the softness and the coarse friction was driving my mind trapped inside my motionless body insane. It took everything I had just to process what was happening; any other thought in my head was completely blown away.

Once again that brilliant green light shone through my eyelids with the familiar chime following after. I felt a very soothing and separate warm feeling flow from her hands and into my body. I was

fully conscious for the experience this time, or perhaps it was the curse making me overly sensitive to it.

"It is stopping. Laven, the trauma has stopped! However, it has yet to recede. No. This will not suffice. I cannot maintain this forever. My magics and life force will replenish in time, but it will do so slower than I am using it to heal this accursed wound... eek!"

She let another shriek of surprise and clenched hard on my lower appendage. The feedback caused my vision behind my eyelids to white out for a couple of seconds. I felt as though my whole brain had to reboot after that surprise stimulation.

"Some liquid is oozing out from the tip? The life force is leaking out. What a stupid useless vessel. Stop immediately!"

I felt the paw wrapped at my base let go and its palm grind down on the tip of my glans, hard. Every nerve ending there was squished, rubbed and stimulated all at once. It was a stimulation powerful enough to jolt my lifeless body. It was a warning for the delayed reaction that eventually made its way to my brain-SHIT!

"What is wrong with this organ?" The anubis started panicking, "It is getting all slimy and slippery. What possible purpose is that supposed to achieve? Ugh, stupid organ! You just excrete waste. How dare you have the audacity to claim my magic and life force is waste! Cease this at once. Get back in there!"

My precum was leaking out and soaking the anubis's paws and getting caught in my foreskin which made it a slippery mess for her to keep her grip steady so she could focus on channeling those energies into my body. One paw was trying to squish down on my glans while the other was stroking the top of the shaft. Needless to say, it was quickly becoming an awkward and clumsy paw job, and this girl hadn't the faintest idea what she was doing.

I was edging closer and closer as something was building up. I was still disconnected from the rest of my body, so I couldn't stop her either. Just as I felt I was seconds away from building up to the final moment, she stopped completely. Her paws retreated, and my penis was left twitching against the cool stagnant air. I felt my balls shrivel up in abject horror; holding their breath in a tantrum until they turned blue. My hands so very much wanted to finish the job themselves, but they remained still and lifeless at my sides.

My lust was writhing inside my head. It was much like a car ride

with a passenger who was loud, obnoxious and kept trying to grab the steering wheel so he could go where 'he' wanted even if it was into oncoming traffic. My sense of reason was slowly regaining control until I heard the sound of clothing hit the floor. My imagination in the back seat suggested that the anubis must be undressing which set my lust off again, and my cock twitched and stood at one hundred and twenty percent again.

“I have no choice. I will have to increase the flow even more. I will have to cross ley lines directly... But... But.... No. This must be done. But... No... But the Pharaoh. What would he think if he saw such a thing? What would he say? I am the Pharaoh's servant! I cannot be doing these things with anyone else!... But Laven, MY servant, will die if I do not... How ungrateful would I be, and what shame I would bring to Pharaoh to fail a man with such a kind heart in his time of need?...”

She seemed to be having a serious moral crisis on her paws as she kept talking to herself. It felt bad to listen in on it, but I was stuck where I was. I couldn't even black out; I had tried a few times over the past few minutes. I felt guilty about eavesdropping. She may talk formally with professionalism, but she was still a girl and tended to get upset and have a short temper. Guilt was wracking my brain and sinking my heart, at least until I felt very soft silky smooth skin weighed down on my thighs. The anubis had sat down on top of me, and a feeling more primal than guilt blew it out of the water.

I felt smooth but dry skin press up against the sides of my dick. Along the top I felt something else entirely. It was wet. My imagination screamed out, “it's the labia!” to which my lust asked what the hell it was talking about. “The outside of a pussy!” It screamed back. That's all my reason heard before it got clocked on the side of the head and torn from the driver's seat. With my heightened sensitivity, I felt pressure and two different types of stimulation which was far beyond what I had just experienced. There was no longer any controlling myself; all that was holding me back now was that my body was completely paralyzed, nearly unable to breathe and unconscious.

The stimulation was so much, and such a warm feeling was seeping into me that my eyelids slowly raised for the first time. It was dark. There were only two sources of light. The first was a burning torch laying on the stone floor. It cast its light and shadows over a very small area. We were tucked beneath a slab as wide as the sarcophagus and the Pharaoh's boat which had fallen and was resting on top of each; somehow, they both managed to hold up all that weight. Meter upon meter of earth was ready to crash down and crush

the two of us. All the room inside the tomb we had available was about two meters high and about three across. A second source of light was shining off the anubis girl, sitting on top of me. The exclamation point tattoos on each side of her abdomen were glowing a pale green. I suppose that is the dull light I was seeing through my eyelids from earlier. Those tattoos were obviously magic, as they shone the same color as the magic that was radiating from her paws into my erect phallus.

And there was the anubis, half-naked; she had stripped off her pants and panties. She was resting on her shins, her knees pointed together and her thighs were squishing my penis between the space between them right at her pelvis. And below that pelvis, the third point of contact, the wet slippery sensation I was feeling. She was performing intercrural sex on me. She had me dick locked steady in that position, and she was holding her paws above the tip where she was focusing her magics and life force into this so called 'ley line'.

When she was talking to herself earlier I was expecting something even more explicit. Was this the girl's idea of what sex was? No. There's no way. I have to give her the benefit of the doubt. Her imagination had to have taken her further than that. She was supposed to be immortal as well. There's no way in hundreds if not thousands of years that she couldn't possibly know. There is no way she could be that naive. If she was, I was afraid my own inner wolf might stir.

Not once did she look up at me to notice I was watching her now. She only looked far up enough every so often to get a look at the wound, a third source of weak white light. Her face was flushed red, she was sweating and she had tears in her eyes.

“Please work... Please... Laven. Don't die. Please. Heal. Heal. Heal!”

I am not sure if she noticed, but in her eagerness, she had started to rock her hips back and forth. I felt the labia split ever so slightly as it ran up and down the main vein on the top of my shaft. She was moving in a steady rhythm and picking up in speed as time went on. That feeling—along with the silky smooth and tanned skin of her thighs and pelvis rubbing against my everything—led me to build up to a climax. Her focus was so intense on her magics she didn't even seem to notice that she had started panting, and her hip movements become overt. She didn't notice; but for the first time, I also noticed her fluffy black tail was wagging behind her. Its movements were exaggerated, just like an excited dog's.

After being denied from before I was coming back quickly with a surge of pleasure building up from my backside, and it was picking up steam. The bullet was being loaded in the chamber, and as soon as the hammer triggered, that would be the end of it.

She then said something that brought me back down to earth, “Laven! Laven it's working!”

I couldn’t move my head to see clearly, but the white light from my abdomen was getting dimmer. I felt my diaphragm heal, and my breathing returned to normal. A pleasant soft feeling of rejuvenation was overwhelming me; it was just as powerful as the savage pleasant feeling of pleasure from the stimulation of my nether-regions. As though convinced I wasn't suffering enough, that brown-reddish light shone again, painting those exclamation mark tattoos on her stomach the same color, the Mummy's Curse. She thought that she was on the home stretch, and so she was redoubling her efforts to ensure it worked. I thought the feeling of sensitivity was extreme before, but that feeling somehow managed to multiply by two. I felt like I'd go crazy at any moment.

The anubis in her excitement squeezed down hard with her thighs, and I just as suddenly climaxed uncontrollably. With a great deal of force my cum shot up into the air and fell back down on her thighs and on her paws. She yelped in surprise and came to a complete stop. She looked stunned for a moment as though something incomprehensible had just happened. She inspected at the semen covering her paws and thighs.

She gasped, “The life-force... No... Not now! Get back in there!”

Wiping up the semen with her paws and getting her fur wet and sticky, she slathered it back onto my recuperating penis as if trying to stuff it back where it had come from. She soon saw how futile that was so instead she tentatively and cautiously ingested it herself and licked her paws clean.

“Ugh. Bitter. Horrid. Is this what life-force tastes like?” She pouted and complained. “...I... but... I absolutely cannot afford to waste it...”

And so, she didn't stop until she finished cleaning up my mess. I was so captivated by the bizarre scene of this naive and clueless girl it came as a surprise when I felt my right knee jerk reflexively. She saw

it too, and her face lit up in joy. She looked down at my abdomen where my wound had been, and she ran her paws over the area. She softly caressed the area and inspected it. Her paws didn't disintegrate on contact, and I was feeling my legs again.

She was absolutely ecstatic, but that look on her face slowly faded away when she looked up at my face at last and saw me looking right at her. She looked down at herself then back at me, and her face turned an even deeper shade of red.

“L-laven? Why are you awake? N-n-n-n-n-o no no no no this isn't what it appears to be! I was merely healing your wounds. It's not as though I was- I mean I wouldn't ever- certainly not with someone like you!”

She scurried back and backwards onto her butt. She tucked her knees up to her chest attempting to cover up her lower half and held them there with one arm while she pointed at me accusingly with the other.

She growled and scowled, “Do not think so highly of yourself. This kind of service is just an obligation I have toward my servant. Just an extreme case. If you get another gaping hole of magical properties in your abdomen I am not rendering assistance again!”

There were a lot of things I wanted to ask her, but I soon realized the problem we were both about to have. I had lost all control of my actions to lust, and my body was still overly sensitive. Her curse had not worn off. I stood up completely in the cramped space; my head was only about a head's distance from the ceiling, and what else was still standing tall was my erection which hadn't even entered a refractory period. It was pulsating painfully in the cold air; it desired something warmer. With my reason still blown away and pushed to the backseat I'm sure it was going to get its way.

“Laven?” Her usual haughty and cool voice was shaking a little as she watched me, “Laven are you well? Why are you looking at me like that? Say something.”

My pants and underwear fell to my ankles, and I kicked them off to the side. The anubis's red eyes followed the denim and cloth fly and hit the nearby stone and plop down onto the ground with a wet thud.

“L-laven?” She said with her voice obviously betraying her

fear.

I kept taking slow, plodding footsteps toward her. My arms slung down and swung to-and-fro like an ape on the move. She scurried backwards as I got closer. I picked up my pace and got closer while she was quickly running out of space to run away. I don't know what kind of expression I was making, but her face as she looked at me told me it had to be a scary one. She tried to turn around and flee, but I was too close. I pounced, swooped down and was able to wrap my arms around her waist and pull her in. Her canine tail had tucked itself between her legs in fright. I fell down on top of her. Her struggling threw me off balance and brought both of us down to our knees. She broke her fall with her paws, and my own hands fell on top of them, and I pinned her to the spot as all of my weight weighed down on her back.

My hands locked together over her navel and held strong as I pulled her toward myself as she tried to crawl away.

“Let me go! Unhand me you brute. You savage cur!”

She protested, but her cheeks were flushed red, her eyes were moist and shimmering and her body gave no further resistance. My erect cock was slapping against her smooth ass and hotdogging between her cheeks, a feeling she soon noticed. She froze momentarily but then just as soon tried to crawl away again. But it wasn't strong or fast enough. I might dare say it was playful instead. Despite the curses from her mouth which got quieter and weaker.

“W-what are you trying to do? Let me go! I won't forgive you. After everything I did and sacrificed for you! You scoundrel!”

She started struggling more than before, and she broke the grip I had as my hands separated. She almost managed to crawl forward, but when I tried to get my grip back on her, my hands violently caressed the tattoos on her stomach. Their texture was different from her skin; it didn't have the same silky smoothness; it felt like coarse body paint, but no matter how much she or myself would sweat or how much I handled it, it didn't come off or smudge. It was part of her, just as much as her skin was.

What I didn't expect was the surprised yelp she gave as her whole body shook. She lost a great deal of strength, and even though in the back of my head which was fighting to get back control felt bad, my lustful self in total command capitalized on the chance. With one free hand, I quickly pulled away the tail sticking between her legs and

covering her privates and ran my cock down the crack of her ass as I brought the tip to the entrance of her pussy and savagely plunged in with one swift motion.

She completely seized up, and her eyes shot wide open. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she gave a yelp and series of whines in pain. Her tail flicked and went ridged as it shot up straight into the air as though an electric shock had coursed through her body. She then went limp for a moment, and I returned my grip to wrap around thighs and hold her ass firmly against my pelvis. Exhausted myself I collapsed my upper body on top of her and rested there for a moment.

She was hiccupping with tears she was fighting back, her teeth were gritting together, and she bared them as her brow furrowed, and her lips pulled back; her face was obviously in pain. I was breathing heavily as was she. She didn't say anything. She was either too angry, terrified, distraught or all of them to do so.

I was the one who leaned over and spoke directly into one of her ears, “Shoshanah...”

She gasped in surprise, “Huh?”

Her head which had been hanging defeated and limp perked right back up right away. Her eyes were wide with shock and were wet and shimmering. The pained frown on her face completely vanished and was replaced with a look of complete surprise.

She turned to look at me, “What... What did you just say?”

“Shoshanah...” I said repeating myself.

“How- Where did you hear that name?” I didn't say anything; I just kept staring at her and she continued, “There's only one person... I have told my name to.”

Well rested after catching my breath, I pulled back my hips and plunged in again. A gasp of air escaped from her mouth. It was still pained, but I didn't have the common courtesy or decency to stop. I pulled back out again despite her inside's efforts to pull me back in, so I obliged it and thrust back.

I called out her name again. Each time I said that name she relaxed her body more and more. Each time she relaxed her pained breathing subsided, and the tightness wrapped around my dick increased. Lead on by that simple formula I kept repeating her name

over and over again. Soon the slap of skin on skin echoed in the small enclosed space and mixed with my animal grunts and her bestial pants and moans.

Shoshanah's words were now hot heavy and becoming sweet, “Wait- Ah! Stop. Please- Ah! Don't- don't move anymore.”

She still protested, but she had stopped trying to crawl away for some time now. I picked up the pace and started to double my efforts. I pulled out and slid back in every three seconds and was picking up the pace toward every two seconds quickly. Somewhere along the way Shoshanah's own hips had started to move backwards and forwards with my own as well. Her tail had started to wag back and forth brushing up against my chest and picked up the pace until it lifted up into the air and started fiercely swishing to and fro in my face.

Shoshanah's resistance was weakening, and she lost the strength to hold herself up by her paws, and her upper body fell against the stone floor. Shoshanah's lower half raised higher into the air, and I pulled her further in. Her breasts were being squashed because her chest was resting against the ground, and her forearms were holding herself up only enough so her face wasn't resting on cold granite as well. I collapsed down on top her and continued thrusting my hips as she grinded against me. It appeared as though she was losing all control of that usually cool yet temperamental self. She looked like she was going into heat.

“Ah~ Ah~ I don't- know what's happening~ Ah~ Ah~” She was panting heavily; her tongue was hanging out and she was struggling to articulate words. “Laven~ Ah~ Laven~ Laven!”

She had started calling out my name, and I bent down and started panting her name into her ears. Each time I did the volume and intensity of her panting and moaning increased in ecstasy.

“Laven~ Is that you? Ah~ Pharaoh? Is that you? Was it you~ Ah~ All along? Ah~ Pharaoh~ Laven!”

She had started calling out not only my name but 'Pharaoh' as well. Was she confusing them? I had no idea what was going on in her head. I cared, but my body and my libido didn't. Her moans of pleasure only spurred me to go on even harder to get her to moan even louder. Each time she picked up the volume the vice grip and suction of her genitals on my cock grew more intense. I could feel every fold, every crevice with this curse afflicting me, and it was driving me insane. I

was bulging. There was blood, a lot of blood, too much of it flowing into my dick. It was painful, but that pain only spurred me onwards toward my destination faster.

The calm, arrogant and temperamental Shoshanah looked like a mess now. That previous self of hers seemed to have been completely washed away in the moment. Her instincts had completely taken over and blown her sense of reason away. She was just like me now who was pounding away at her from behind. But even in all my ecstasy I was losing my strength. I leaned over, and her face turned over to look at me. Our eyes met, and our noses touched each other. There wasn't a need for words; our tongues reached out in sync and locked together, and we drew one another in.

Her voice was a sweet mess of slurps, moans and her own slurred words trying to escape her lips each time she had a chance to exhale, “Ah~ Laven~ Pharaoh~ What's happening~ Something~ Something is~ Something is~ Ah!”

I felt the waves and pulsations inside her folds suddenly intensify. Each wave and contraction was coming sooner and sooner, and I felt the familiar build up in my groin. I kept plunging in violently, and from somewhere I found the strength and endurance to whip myself into a furious pace. Shoshanah wasn't able to handle it, and neither could I. We sucked at each other’s tongues and locked lips until the last moment. I pulled out for the last time and plunged in as far as I could. At the same time, the most powerful contraction of all inside Shoshanah gripped me tight and didn't let go or even let me slip.

An explosion from my loins poured into the anubis. Her wagging tail once again went completely rigid against her spine. Our lips locked in a deep, hot and heavy french kiss as the muscles in my buttocks went absolutely crazy. I groaned and moaned, and Shoshanah, with her tongue hanging out and her eyes rolling back, let out a bizarre ecstasy filled sound that was half a scream and half a howl of a wolf.

Those contractions continued and milked me dry as I unleashed everything and more than I thought I had into her. Her insides finally relaxed enough that I was able to slip out. Her entrance now unplugged spilt globs of white hot semen tinged pink from between her folds. She slunk forward and laid down, stomach first and flat like a board, and I collapsed on top of her. Both of us were breathing hard and completely exhausted. As my body cooled down, I realized a furry and soft sensation squeezing my hands; Shoshanah

had at some point earlier grabbed hold of my hands and refused to let go.

At some point, I had drifted off. I did not know what else I had done as my memory of the whole event from before had become unreal and hazy. I couldn't make heads or tails of it anymore; parts of it may very well have gone missing. One thing was for sure; I had lost control and forced myself on the anubis girl Shoshanah. I awoke to find myself seated against the wall. Sitting between my legs, leaning up against my chest and curled up with her knees tucked into her chest was Shoshanah.

“He is gone. Isn't he?” She said in a dry monotone.

She wasn't going to give me a minute to collect my thoughts was she? It wasn't the first question I was expecting to answer either. I figured she'd start by becoming violent, throwing insults and perhaps ending it off with gouging my eyes out with those claws.

My initial impression was that she was just being cryptic. It seemed to be the national pastime considering everyone I met in this world.

“Why would you say that?” I asked in return.

She responded by grabbing a pawful of loose stone from the 'wall' we were sitting against. She brought it closer to her chest and cradled it there for a moment. After she had paid her respects, she held it for me to see. It was white stone and very fragile. It took me a few moments; but from somewhere deep down inside my brain, an answer came to me

“Gypsum. Then that would mean...”

“The Pharaoh's sarcophagus.” She said completing my thought. “I did not realize it immediately. My attention was elsewhere. We are both alive because he shielded us both.”

A giant slab of rock that was once the roof had crashed down on top of us. We were now trapped in the space between the pharaoh's sarcophagus and his petrified wooden boat, the same one from that weird dream I just had. Now the treasures have both been demoted to load bearing walls. Of course, neither would get by unscathed after the whole tomb came tumbling down. The Pharaoh's body was still inside his coffin, his ancient granite sarcophagus. It was made of perfectly flawless stone but was now pulverized. Half of it was still holding strong, but whatever remains that were locked inside were

without a doubt crushed into dust.

“But that is not the only means which I came to that conclusion. He threw himself to his death.”

I thought that whole event was a dream. Meeting that man in a marsh and sailing a long dead river with him. Then again, where else would I have ever heard a name like 'Shoshanah'? And did she say, 'throwing himself to his death'? He did plunge into a bottomless river... How did she know?

That answer was very easy; Shoshanah had been there. Not all of her but a part of her. But if his body was pulverized before I blacked out and died, how did I meet him? Why is she only dejected over his death now instead of the moment I returned and during her 'ritual'?

Another easy answer. The Pharaoh had said time in The Land of the Dead did not flow as time did in The Land of the Living. Did he know his time would be over soon when he threw himself off his boat? When I pulled her back from following him, did the boat decide to cease existing as a coincidence? Trying to think about it made my head hurt.

She didn't say anything for a while after that. She just continued to sit there. Her tail flipped back and forth from resting on her right to the left every so often; but other than that, she didn't do or say a thing. The awkward air was palatable.

“Okay.” I finally broke, “If you're waiting for an apology. You got it. I'm a horrid wretched person who did something he can't take back.”

“Yes. You are.” She replied coldly.

“Alright. I don't know what I can do, but I'll do anything to make it up. Just name it. Whatever punishment.”

One of her ears twitched, “Anything?” She asked a raising inflection in her voice at last.

I felt the danger I had just walked into, “Well. Maybe not anything 'anything'.”

“Then do not apologize.”

That one took a few seconds to process.

“What?” Is all I could say.

“Was it so terrible an experience you felt it necessary to apologize for it?”

“You've lost me.”

“You said, 'Anything'. That is what I desire.”

“You're just going to let me off the hook for-”

“No. You have hapless manners. Slovenly. Brutish. Uncouth. Villainous.”

She paused for a moment; I thought she was finished which left each of those daggers sticking in my chest.

“However, you are selfless, brave and thoughtful. You did not think twice to save my life—twice.”

“Well, I think that-”

“Besides. That was my fault.”

“Hey now. If I let the victim go around blaming herself people will start to think-”

“I was overzealous with the Mummy's Curse. A curse that forcefully binds the mind directly to the body. It is used in embalming and mummification; it grants a mind the ability to control a body long after it died. Even if that body is nothing but a corpse made of dust. When used on a living body, it heightens the senses. It causes the body to be unnaturally sensitive to external stimuli, and the mind is bound to those feelings.”

“And you're saying that is why I-”

“Pushed me down and attacked me... What I still don't understand is what manner of fighting was that?”

Wait. What?

“What manner of combat was that which caused me to... well...”

She started blushing again.

“Wait. Hold on. That wasn't fighting.”

She blinked a couple of times and turned to look at me, “That wasn't wrestling?”

I was too skeptical for my own good right now, “Do you even know what wrestling is?”

“I had never done it before. But I recall watching such an event in tournaments between great men long ago. Although they must have trained their bodies well to resist the effects of those maneuvers.”

She held her chin in her paws and went into deep contemplation. Is this girl for real?

“That wasn't wrestling, nor was it fighting.”

“If it wasn't either, what was it?”

She was asking so innocently I almost didn't have it in me to continue.

“That was sex.”

Another awkward moment of silence hung over the two of us. I stared at her with my face still frozen in disbelief, and she looked at me with a cold calculating face scrunched in thought as she dwelled on her curiosity. That moment lasted for about another ten seconds until her face slowly, from the neck up, turned a deep flushed red. I think I almost saw steam come out from the top of her head too.

Her reaction was immediate, violent and flustered. She turned around and balled her paws into fists and started hitting me with them overhanded like a deranged windmill.

“You beast! Monster! Scum! Pervert!” She screamed

“Ow! Hey listen- Ouch! Cut it out.”

I stood up and tried to get away, but she had me cornered and kept me up against the wall. It was then I realized for the first time she was actually almost as tall as I was.

“How dare you? Why would you do that? Anything but that!”

“I said- Dammit! Stop that. Shoshanah, stop!”

When I called out her name she finally stopped; her paws unfolded from fists, and she clung to my shirt collar. I kept my hands raised in a sign of surrender and hung there awkwardly while she remained quiet.

“No other options then...” She said quietly.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

She suddenly held up one of her digits to my face, “First, I am servant to only the Pharaoh!”

I looked right and left and was puzzled. What was happening, and where this was going? “Yes? And?”

“Second!” She held up a second digit. “Only one other heart I have ever seen weighs as little as yours!” She held up a third. “Third, when you died you went to the Land of the Dead! A realm only for the noble and royal dead.” The fourth and final digit, her thumb, stuck out. “Forth, I brought you back to the Land of the Living with my own life-force! No small sacrifice on my behalf.”

She stopped for a moment and stared at me. I think she may have been expecting me to understand what she was getting at and finish for her. When I didn't she poked me with her index claw.

“Amenenofru's last words were that everything was left to you. I have decided that shall include me.” She said while proudly resting her other paw over her heart.

“Wait a-”

She dug that claw into my chest a bit more, and I winced in pain and stopped.

“I am bound to your life now. I compromised my immortality for you. Not that I did it FOR you. I had to. I couldn't just be indebted to you for saving my life like that. Then you went ahead and....and...did that... Anyways! You're gonna take responsibility!”

“Whoa, hold on-Ow!” I screamed in pain as she dug it in further when I tried to defend myself.

“Because of you I lost everything. The least you're going to do is hand yourself over. You're going to be the new Pharaoh.”

“He buried that kingdom. You heard him.”

“Then you are going to make another one. I will see to it. If I am stuck in the Land of the Living from now on, you're not going to get away with just a few words of apology. I will not abandon my duties as an anubis. Especially not when I am the last of my kind.”

“Just a few words please-”

“Not until you stand up straight.” She cracked my back and forcibly realigned it despite it being cricked from these cramped quarters. “Stop sticking that chin out. Stop grumbling and no sighing!”

She started nit picking and man handling me in a flurry of activity, and I was getting swept away.

“And...And...Say my name!”

I looked at her. She had puppy eyes and was fidgeting nervously as if her tirade a moment ago was a lie. I nervously looked right and left as I kept an eye out for someone who could watch the embarrassing scene.

“Shoshanah.” I said at last.

Her eyes closed, and she breathed deeply, and her face became blissful and fulfilled. She opened her eyes slowly and gazed at me with those red eyes of hers. I was still feeling like a deer caught in headlights. I didn't notice until it was too late that she had wrapped her arms around my neck and was bringing her blushing face toward my own with expecting lips. I flustered myself this time, so I instinctively moved my head back, but I had nowhere to go as she was getting closer.

Then I had a bad feeling from a completely different source. I could see Shoshanah was getting a little hot and heavy, but I felt the temperature of this little hole was getting unnaturally hot very quickly. A dull red light caught my eye, and I stole a glance directly upwards. Above the two of us, in the ceiling, a large manhole sized glowing red circle had appeared.

“Look out!” I screamed.

With all my strength, I threw Shoshanah to my right. She yelped in surprise as I threw myself to the left. Not a moment too soon as the patch of red glowing stone melted and dropped to the ground like molten lava. With a splat, it hit the stone and started cooling off

immediately with a hiss as it still ate into the earth for a few more seconds until it cooled down to room temperature.

Long locks of red hair in a ponytail fluttered down from the hole in the ceiling and soon following it was a head. A gorgeous feminine face with bronzed skin, fins instead of human ears, luminescent amber colored crocodile eyes and two reptilian human like claws and talons that grabbed hold of the edge of the new hole in the ceiling as she was dangled from above. The profile could belong to no one else but Rose. She looked back and forth until she looked to her left and spotted me.

“Laven! I found you! I knew you were alright!”

“Rose? Wait.... What? How the hell did you-”

She pointed to her cute little nose, “I caught wind of your smell and tracked you down. There are some hallways above here. Your scent disappeared suddenly into the floor, so I just decided to start digging.”

Incomprehensible as always. It was definitely her. Rose wasn't done there though. She sniffed the air, turned around and laid her eyes on Shoshanah. They exchanged a long and awkward gaze. Rose's eyes scanned the anubis and saw she wasn't wearing her pants or underwear. Then she looked back and me and saw that I was still not wearing mine. Then she slowly turned back to Shoshanah.

They both said the exact same thing in perfect sync, “Who is she?”

Chapter 22

From the ink-black darkness, I once more awoke in a fantastical place. My surroundings were the insides of a school; doors and endless rows of lockers stretched out before me. The whole world was painted monochrome, simple black and white and nothing more. I was drawing a blank on how I wound up here, perhaps I had at some point fallen asleep. I felt like I had strayed into a memory, my memory, and I vaguely remember another dream like this days ago. These were rare occasions where scattered remnants of my previous life surfaced from the depths of my subconscious.

The inside of this school was empty; not a soul stirred, and my footsteps echoed eerily. I walked the ghostly hallways, but no matter how far I traveled I reached no destination. No matter how far I went the surroundings remained the same. I pressed forward regardless and was rewarded; the further I walked the less alone I was. Specters started to appear along with the din of countless conversations. These ghost-like silhouettes slowly filled out into solid shapes; they were people, humans, students. There were dozens, hundreds of them. They were young and appeared as though they were high school aged. I couldn't focus on any one conversation to figure out where or when I was; it all mixed together into a chaotic mass of noise that was like static, a white space. I had color when I looked down at myself, so I was the outsider, a ghost in this strange place.

My vision was becoming unfocused, and I was getting dizzy until I laid my eyes on the first shocking sight in this place. Once more I had spotted someone who looked like me. He was younger, his hair was buzz-cut, his frame was lankier and more awkward. Despite the pathetic appearance those eyes and facial features couldn't belong to any one but me. The similarity was far too striking to ignore. I felt like I was looking into an old year book I wished I could close. The kid was all alone and standing outside a classroom door; a math classroom from what the door said, the first door I was able to read without the words melting into chicken scratches.

Without the slightest warning, a specter ran into his shoulder. The ghostly frame fell backwards and onto the floor, spilling the contents of whatever it was carrying. The kid was stunned and didn't even look down right away, but he eventually collected himself.

“Are you alright?” He said almost with a stutter.

My attention was drawn to the silhouette on the ground who

had morphed into a petite girl the moment I had split my attention. With shoulder length black hair which hid part of her face adorned with thick rimmed glasses. She gave off a complex impression. Her clothing was much unlike her face which seemed half hidden; she wasn't wearing the baggy and unflattering clothing I expected from the kind of person who would wear her face the way she did. Her clothes were trendy, tight black jeans and gaudy, colorful and impracticable shoes with a shirt with a wide open neck exposing the collarbone and ever so slightly present cleavage underneath.

Her face looked up at the kid with a mixture of pain and embarrassment. She picked up her things in a frenzy and then abashedly noticed the hand that he had extended to help her up, and she reluctantly took it. The specters surrounding me moved on with their own business and seemed to ignore the scene, much to the relief of the girl. The volume of their conversations had died down as I listened in to these two.

“Yeah. I'm fine... Thanks.” She said.

She didn't hold onto his hand any longer than she had to, and she brushed herself off quickly. Seeing she was alright the kid's hand reached out to grab hold of the door knob and collided with the girl's. The two of them pulled back their hands in a hurry. Now the two of them were staring at each other wide eyed, but they soon laughed it off nervously at first, but it quickly subsided into one of genuine and mutual relief. The kid opened the door and allowed the girl in who quickly shuffled inside.

There wasn't anything outside in the hallway but ghosts, and the door remained opened so I followed the two inside. I walked through the door and inside was a classroom half full of specters. Alone in the back row of desks were the kid and the girl. They sat in desks next to each other and seemed to be holding some sort of awkward conversation flashing crooked forced smiles.

“So you were lost and worried you wouldn't make it in time?” The kid was saying with a little laugh. “Well, if you just transferred in after the first term, I wouldn't want to be late either.”

“Yeah. I was like, not going to be late for the first class. So I was just running and slammed right into you.”

“You're pretty light. It didn't hurt.” He waited a second before continuing, “What? You thought I was gonna say you were heavy or

something?" He finished with a wry smile.

"What?" She said flushing red, "Stop it."

They shared a laugh.

"The name is-" I couldn't catch the last part; it was interrupted by a burst of loud static, even the walls of the classroom flickered with the sound of popping and hissing like on a static television. "-by the way."

"I'm Kimmy." She responded with a warm smile.

A slide-show played out before me. The hair and clothes changed, but the two kids sitting and talking stayed the same. I could hear snippets of conversation like some badly edited playback on a shoddy cassette tape.

"Really? Never heard of that band before?" He said.

"I was following them on some online videos ages ago. I knew they were so gonna like go big." She said cheerfully.

"If you just bring this over to the right and put this one under that one to divide it, just like the formula says here, these problems are pretty easy."

"Easy? Maybe for a smart guy like you. I can't do this kinda stuff."

"So why didn't you just tell your friend that?"

"What? Are you kidding me? She'd have freaked."

"Nah. I can't watch shows like that. They're so fake."

"That's the point though! Just have some fun."

"So your birthday is coming up, isn't it Kim?"

"What? I never told you that."

"You're always reading the horoscopes in those magazines, and you only circle Capricorn. The teacher always organizes students by birth dates for some reason, and you get your marks back after Trevor. That loud mouth wouldn't shut up about getting his license soon, and since there's only a week left till the fourteenth, it's gotta be

in the next few weeks."

"...You're scary sometimes, you know that?"

"Scary or too smart for my own good? You should just stick to one insult already."

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds, but they broke out into laughter again.

"Yeah. The thirteenth." She said embarrassed.

"Oh?" The kid went into thought for a brief moment. "You free the day after?"

She said coquettishly. "Valentines?"

"I got a surprise for you. No, it isn't perverted, so don't even think of giving me that look."

Kim thought about it for a moment, "Yeah. Sure. Why not, right?"

The walls of the classroom fell backwards into the ground with thunderous crashes. A grey dust storm kicked up in its wake, and the two teenagers and their friendly conversation were blown away along with the silhouettes. I was returned to a familiar scene. It was a room I had seen the child in during the previous dream. It couldn't be anywhere else other than this kid's home. My home. The one that wasn't the apartment; it was where my parents lived. The kid was in a home office, and he was pacing about the room with an old cord telephone to his ear.

"Dad? I know you're busy, but I just need a couple minutes, okay? Yeah, I'll make it quick. At the stadium, you sponsor there right?... Yes yes yes, I'm getting to the point. You get promotion tickets right? You got some lying around for something on the Fourteenth? Yeah... Yeah... Yeah... Well I need two of em. Look, I don't ask for much, it's for a band no one you know is going to want to go to anyways. I know they're box seats, but come on! You can at least do this right? How about a ride too? You can arrange that too right-... Come on. You can afford it... Yes, it's for a girl... Thanks Dad."

The kid hung up the phone and let out a loud sigh with a smile on his face.

The winds and dust roiled and blew the scene away, and I was spirited away back to the hallways of the school. That kid was standing there looking down at two glossy passes on key chain straps in his hand. He was waiting for someone to emerge from a classroom opposite him. How long he was waiting, I didn't know. Finally, people started pouring out from the room until the girl named Kimmy also emerged. There were several other specters around her. They were laughing very girlish laughs, and every one of them was a specter. They looked and sounded more like Banshees. More oblivious than I was the kid who saw only Kim and stepped forward.

“Hey, Kim, you got a minute?”

“'Kimmy's busy. Aren't you Kim?” Said one of the banshees, lashing out at the kid.

The girl in the middle looked around confused and could only smile and not say anything.

“Who is this guy anyways?” Said another.

“I know him. He's like,-” That static again that made the whole world pop and fizzle. “-he's in my math class. Kim is there too.” Said the third.

“Get lost, loser.” Said the first, apparently their leader. “We're going to lunch and don't follow us, creeper.”

And there stood the kid, paralyzed and confused. He didn't know what had happened. Held behind his back he just slid those passes into his pockets again and stumbled off.

I watched a series of scenes switch from one to the next, and they all had the same theme. The kid tried to find some opening, some excuse, to get close to Kim and talk with her. Each time he was denied. Eventually Kim stopped giving a pained and remorseful look when she was pulled away. It got so bad that even that expression was soon no longer there, and she pulled away on her own. Each time the kid had those passes in his pocket.

One final scene change after a barrage of them, outside the math class the teacher had stayed behind and was talking with someone. It was Kim who was getting an earful from the math teacher. Old tests compared to new ones. I put two and two together. Angry, dejected and humiliated she stormed out of the classroom and ran right into the kid who was blocking her path. She tried to get past him,

but the kid stepped in the way and continued to block her.

“Out of the way.” She said angrily.

“No. I got something to talk to you about.” He said calmly.

“I don't need you tutoring me anymore.”

“This isn't about math. This weekend, you're still free right? It's the day after your birthday.”

Her pissed and annoyed face crumbled as she remembered something. She looked away embarrassed and ashamed.

“Yeah. You remember. Valentines.” He said noticing the change.

“Remember what? What about Valentines?”

“You're not that great a liar. I know all your tells by now.”

“That's gross, you creep. Stop watching me like that.”

The poker face on the kid cracked for a second as his lips curled upwards for a brief moment.

“You got your friends now, I know, but I still got a present for you. The same surprise.”

She squirmed uncomfortably.

“You do?” She said with a soft voice.

“Yeah. If you're still down for it, I can pick you up at seven.”

“Pick me up? You don't-”

“Drive? Don't worry. I got things covered.”

Kim's eyes cast downwards and went into thought. She steeled herself and looked back up.

“Yeah. I'm still down for that. I still don't have anything else to do.”

The kid breathed a sigh of relief. He stuck his hands in his pockets, but stopped himself. He was almost too excited and ruined the surprise he had been building up.

“I'll see you then.” He said with a parting smile.

Kim smile and nodded and walked past the kid who let her go. He turned around and watched her go before he walked toward the other end of the hallway with a spring in his step.

The hallway dissolved back into the math classroom, silhouettes of students milling about. The kid was at his desk, working away at an assignment; Kim was in the seat beside him texting on her cell phone. Nothing but the usual chaotic noise of countless babbling conversations, but they unexpectedly gave way.

“No way, man. They haven't held that party for years.”

“I heard one kid got parents with private property up in the woods. He said he'd totally hold it there.”

“You're fucking with me. How the hell does he think he's gonna get away with it?”

“Whatever man, the Winter Cooler is back on. I wouldn't fucking miss it.”

Dust blew away the classroom to a room to reveal a room where the kid sat on the end of his bed with a cellphone in hand. He was dialing the same number again and again, and each time the other end didn't pick up. A quick gust of wind and dust kept sweeping over the room, and he was sitting somewhere different each time. I watched as a clock on the nightstand jumped from the early afternoon until almost seven o'clock. For the last few minutes the kid didn't move at all. Finally, he stirred again, but he dialed a different number.

“Adam... Yeah it's me. Gregg's son. Yeah... Look... I know you're just about to head out, but you can stay home. Yeah, last minute change of plans... Yeah... Don't worry I'm alright. Yeah... You have a good night too. Bye.”

The kid ended the call and dropped the cell phone onto the floor and fell back onto his bed. On impact, the bed exploded into dust, and the whole scene swirled into a mess which settled back down into the math class. Half the students were missing; a few others who showed up had bags under their eyes and looked almost dead. They were obviously hungover. In the seat beside him, there was no Kim.

Dust blew again, and the classroom was once again filled with

all the students, but still there wasn't any sign of Kim. Until one last and final girl came shuffling into the classroom. A thousand disembodied eyes from the roiling mass of gray dream-like dust threw their knowing glances her way. The dust swirled and revealed a desk full of junk and graffiti with markers.

Slut. Bitch. Cunt.

Walking down the hallways, the kid was approached by a group of large and burly silhouettes.

“Hey man. Tell Kimmy something for me, 'Thanks for the new material. Best bust nuts I've ever had. Great stuff.'”

With that the other silhouettes beside him exchanged high fives, hooted and hollered before going on their way. On the bulletin board in front of the school a group of teachers were tearing down a bunch of white sheets of paper with only a single string of letters and numbers on it. A URL. One of the sheets escaped unnoticed from the teacher's trash pile before the kid's feet. He picked it up and hastily, on instinct, shoved it into his pocket when a teacher turned around to see he was watching them. They shooed him away, and he left the school like all the other students around him.

Sitting at a computer late that night and spinning in a chair, the kid came to a stop every so often and looked at the crumpled piece of paper. He was obviously tormented, but curiosity eventually got the better of him. He slowly punched in the keys for the long and encrypted looking URL. It led only to an embedded video file on a white backdrop with nothing else. What played there drew the kid in and wouldn't let him pull away. I was watching with him, but I felt disconnected. I was able to look away when it got to be too much for me.

Deep in the woods with snow on the ground, the orange of a flame casting light on an otherwise dark night, amid the loud music and cheering and hollering was a disheveled girl barely conscious. Surrounded by a bunch of larger men; men who were not silhouettes this time. Their flies open; their dicks out and hard surrounding the girl. Forcing a deep kiss there, one after the other received. Rubbing their members on the skin of the girl who had been mostly stripped of the clothes she was still wearing. A blowjob not once, but many times, no protest from the girl. Finally insertion and messy climax, one after the other in succession for minutes on end. The video went on for about thirty minutes if the bottom progress bar was to be believed.

Even the kid couldn't watch the whole thing. He eventually snapped out of it, and closed the page. His shaking hand went over to the history and cleared it; he tore apart the piece of paper into dozens of pieces and rushed to throw it into the toilet and flushed it. I couldn't see from where I watched what his face was like, but he didn't make a single sound during the whole affair.

The bathroom melted and reformed back into the school. The kid was striding down the hallway, and I was walking behind him, and I could hardly keep up as he weaved through the crowds. Luckily, I could pass through it like smoke. He kept walking until the density of the other students thinned out. Eventually he was the only one other than me who was following him. Behind a stairwell in some forgotten and abandoned area of the school.

“What do you want?” He said to someone.

He held out his cellphone with a text message still on screen. Coming out from behind the stairs was Kim. Her face was dark and downcast, and her eyes were red.

“I wanted to talk,” She said.

“I got something to get out of the way first,” The kid snipped in.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a glossy card on a key-chain strap and tossed it into the air toward the girl. She nearly didn't catch it, but she managed despite how flustered and scattered she was. She inspected it, read it and looked up with a pained look in her eyes. I followed her gaze back to the kid who was holding up the second pass. He took it in both hands and tore it in half and then quarters and so on until there was nothing left but confetti. He tossed the pieces into the air and let them flutter down onto the ground, and they were blown away by the wind around her feet. Kim merely watched in bewilderment and didn't say a word.

The kid turned around and started to walk away without a word, but Kim threw herself forward and grabbed onto his arm.

“Wait! I'm sor- Eek!”

The kid violently threw off her arm and sent her down to the floor. She looked back up at him with wide eyes and probably wished she hadn't. It was painful and chilling for even me to look at. The kid's face was twisted, so very angry and filled with malice. He was looking

down at something that disgusted him.

“Get lost. You fucking filthy slut.” He said coldly and callously.

Kim, or so who I thought it was, had reverted back into a silhouette like all the others as she was still on her knees. The walls and ceiling dissolved away, and the black darkness crept back in. The last thing to dissolve was the silhouette on the ground which did so slowly, painfully slowly.

The darkness did not remain for long. Another colored world that almost stung my eyes after so much black and white came into view like someone had started to undim the lights. It was a club, music was blaring, lights were flashing and bodies were moving all about and squirming on the dance floor. At a counter and seated on a stool was a young man. His face was exactly like mine. It couldn't be anyone else other than me. This wasn't years ago; this could have been months, weeks if not days before I ended up on this strange world. I watched myself down a shot of clear liquid. There were another four shot glasses lined up beside it, but I didn't seem worse for wear perched on that stool.

From behind a hand wrapped around my shoulder, it belonged to a flushed red man who was acting friendly. Sickeningly friendly. It looked like it was the guy on the couch from the other dream.

“Hey man! You have fun over here?”

“Loads of fun.” I said to him sarcastically. “I could have done this cheaper in my room, and it wouldn't smell like bad perfume and cologne, and my ears wouldn't hurt.”

“That's because you gotta let loose, man! Live a little! Hey. Hey! I was talking with a girl over there,” He didn't point anywhere in particular. “She seemed like a nice girl. How about you talk to her? Maybe you'll hit it off?”

I watched myself sigh and turn around in the bar stool, “I was watching. You were talking to her outside the door to the men's washroom.”

“Yeah? And?”

“The last time I saw you pick up girls from outside the men's washroom like that for me; I watched her walk out of it before you

talked to her, and her breath smelled like fresh mint mouthwash."

"I don't see the problem. That girl was sick and freaky. If you asked her, a guy looking like you, she totally would have-"

"Forget it. I'm going home. I've had enough."

From behind the man who I suspected was my 'friend' a girl appeared; she looked exactly like the girl who was sitting beside this guy from my other dream.

"You're such a loser-" A burst of static again, "-you're never gonna get laid." She said maliciously.

"Shut your cunt, slut."

Her reaction was instantaneous, even if she had a hard time lunging with those heels on.

"What did you just say to me?"

Her boyfriend held her back as she seemed ready to swing her purse at me as soon as I strayed into range.

"You're lucky nice guys like your boyfriend are around. I'd never touch festering used goods like you. I'd sooner stay a loser for the rest of my life than help encourage girls to behave like you."

"Shut the fuck up you virgin piece of shit!"

She really did look ready to kill me if she could, but her boyfriend easily kept her held back. He really was a nice guy, or he was too drunk to care about how I was insulting not only him but his girl.

"Come on, he's just kidding. Don't let him get you so worked up. He's just playing."

Maybe I wasn't. I didn't look it, but maybe those shots had gone to my head, and I was speaking my mind. In the confusion and argument between the two as he tried to calm his girlfriend down I watched as I slipped off the bar stool, slapped a tip on the counter for the bartender and walked away. I followed myself out into the street where the guy caught up and struggled to keep the pace with myself walking.

"I'm sorry man. She's a nice girl. It's just you know how to

press her buttons, and I'll admit she doesn't have the best sense of humor-”

I stopped and faced him, “Maybe I wasn't kidding?”

“Why would anyone actually think like that?” He said genuinely confused.

“I wonder.” I said to him. “I don't like loose women. Simple as that.”

“I don't get what your problem is-. Hey! Come on man, come ba-”

I watched myself walk and disappear down the street into the cold night.

That darkness of the night spread suddenly, and it snuffed out the city lights and the faces illuminated by those lights around my ghostly self. My world, the memory of it, faded away, and the darkness gave way to another light that crept up from the bottom of my vision until I was looking up at a night sky. I felt my back resting on a blanket riding soft sand. I had been suddenly pulled from my sleep, and I felt two weights against my arms as they were being tugged in opposite directions. They were both warm feelings, both soft, but one fuzzy and the other scaly.

“Get your paws off him. I'm keeping him warm tonight.”

“Warm? Hardly. You're chaffing the Pharaoh's delicate pale and royal skin with your unsightly scales.”

“It's cold out. I can warm him up the best. Just like I do every night.”

Wait. Every night?

“E-every n-night? How uncouth! I was correct in presuming you would cause nothing but mischief. I knew it was unwise to keep my eyes off you. Get your claws off the Pharaoh. My Pharaoh!”

“He is not yours. He is my husband! Get your own! He was mine first!”

“Our meeting was predetermined by divine providence. Cease your stubborn selfishness.”

“Our meeting was destiny. Get lost you homewrecker!”

This scene reminded me of what had happened earlier that day. I see nothing had changed at all, and as soon as I was asleep those two were at it again. I had nearly forgotten what I was dreaming about just now, something about school. Anyways, it wasn't as important as getting these two to stop fighting before it turned physical and claws, swords, magic and curses were tossed around.

“I'm awake now you two.” I said.

The two stopped fighting immediately. Their faces were hovering above my own as their arms were wrapped around my arms, which were squished between their cleavage. I could almost spot the sparks flying off as their gazes were locked with each other, and their teeth flared as they growled at each other. But they both had wide-eyed looks that said, “I've done it now.”

“Didn't we agree we had to be well rested and get out of the desert in the next three days?”

“Susan started it.” Rose brazenly said.

“I certainly did not! And cease referring to me by that vulgar moniker. I will not have my dignified and noble name besmirched by your crass mannerisms.”

“You did so. I was sleeping and then you hit me.”

“Because you were accosting the Pharaoh in his slumber.”

“You too.”

“I will not surrender the Pharaoh to your licentious wiles.”

“You wanna fight about it?”

“Only if you wish humiliation upon yourself.”

“No fighting.” I said interrupting them. “I told you no fighting.”

They both sounded off in stereo, “Why not?”

“I owe a lot to you both. Everything I got. I know I also need your help, so I can't turn away either of you. Right now, I just need to get home or find a way to talk those who are wondering where the hell I am. I got to at least say I'm alright. You can settle it after that... Just not here. Please? Can you do that?”

The two of them protested without saying anything. Instead, they went back to bickering back and forth between themselves.

“I have his sword arm.” Rose declared boasting clenching her grip and squeezing my right arm between her breasts even tighter.

“I can hear his heart beating.” Susan retorted and blissfully rested one of her fuzzy ears my chest.

I wasn't sure if this was going to stop anytime soon. As long as I was between the two of them I was confident it wouldn't get out of hand. I closed my eyes and tried to go back to sleep with the two girls wrapped around my arms, pulling, tugging, squirming and fighting. I was so tired, but I somehow managed.

Chapter 23

Just like any other day in this land, the sun overhead punished the dry and windless dunes of this accursed desert. Not a cloud hung in the sky, and all around me was a shimmering mirage, but I knew full well that not a drop of water existed anywhere. Without a speck of nature in sight and still winds there wasn't even a sound save the crunch of sand under my feet. My feet stumbled and bumbled their way up, over and down the endless sand dunes. It wasn't because of a lack of balance on my behalf; it was my two traveling companions.

These two women were clutching onto each of my arms and pressing themselves against my body. Their eyes were almost always in a deadlock stare with each other with furrowed brows and occasionally growling and hissing at each other. It was making walking nigh impossible. They hadn't improved since yesterday and had been fighting nearly nonstop since. At least I managed to convince them not to try to kill each other, but that's only because I claimed I would be irrevocably cross with whomever won or simply survived.

It felt like I was competing in two separate three-legged races at the same time; but despite my earlier protests, neither were going to back down. Rose needed to keep constant physical contact; she was able to negate the effect of the desert heat on my body by doing so. Rose started by holding my hand, but that only caused Shoshanah to become agitated. With her paw, she grabbed hold of my other hand. In response, Rose wrapped herself around my right arm and Shoshanah did the same with my left immediately after. This was a jealous fit I'm not sure we had the time for. That didn't seem to concern those two though. The only thing that was on either of their minds was winning this war one battle at a time. I couldn't remain ignorant that I was the spoils to be won.

If it wasn't for Shoshanah I would be dead. Dead for real this time, not just in living conditions that would make me wish I was dead. I had stumbled upon the tomb she was guarding and put it in danger by leading Zerin to it. She fought on my behalf, I did some stupid things and got myself killed and she somehow brought me back from the brink of death. If it wasn't for Rose, we would have been trapped in that cramped space forever. I don't know how she did it, but she managed to melt through many meters of stone on the exact right spot with just a hunch and a scent. I don't know how or why these things keep happening, and I wish I could just let it all slide, but I am a stupid and curious man by nature.

“Is it alright if we just go back to how we were walking this morning? It's hard for me to walk.” I said, protesting again.

“You heard Laven. Let go. You're in the way.” Rose said across my chest.

“Absolutely not.” Shoshanah flatly refuted. “Don't feign ignorance and try to deceive me. I comprehend the secondary effects of your body heating techniques. If I do not mitigate them and continue to observe you, you will take advantage of it.”

They both returned to staring one another down and trying to intimidate the other. I wasn't sure which one would win in an actual fight; Rose could end it quickly with brute force, but the longer the fight went on, the more it went into Shoshanah's favor with her arsenal of spells and curses that could bring Rose to her knees. After the encounter with Zerin I wasn't willing to allow any potential ally to go off and eliminate the other. Brun is just some northern hinterlands in a much wider world; there are bound to be more Zerins if not worse. If I was going to figure out where I am, why I am here and how I was going to get home, I'm going to need all the help I can get.

“No fighting!” I said interrupting the two. “Okay, can we just stop for a minute?”

I stopped suddenly; the other two did not miss a beat and stopped on a dime as well.

“Can you both knock it off already? You've been like this since yesterday.”

They both stopped glaring at one another but refused to look at me. Perhaps out of some sense of shame.

“I am not going to pick sides. Not ever, not in the near future and especially not now. We're still in the middle of Death Valley here, and we've got about a day or two worth of food and water, and then we're in serious trouble.”

“We would have the luxury of many more if the lizard would quell her sickeningly ravenous appetite,” Shoshanah taunted.

“I eat because keeping Laven this hot makes me tired. I also have to do it for you too!” Rose shouted.

“I did not request that service of you.” Shoshanah said, turning her nose up at Rose.

“Laven said I had to, 'don't fight, help Hannah out too', that's what he said. Not like certain someone, I'm helping.”

“My name is not Hannah! It's not Susan and certainly not Sauna! I will not tolerate your continued degradation of my correct and honorable name!”

“Then how about you let go, come over and make me?”

“Enough!” I screamed, interrupting the two.

Rose's flame flickered, and she flinched while Shoshanah's bushy tail retreated between her legs, and her ears lowered against her head.

“I said we got bigger things to worry about rather than fighting each other. We have to get out of this desert as fast as we can, and then after that we still gotta worry about the Church that is no doubt very pissed at all of us.”

“They would be worried.” Rose mused to herself. “What with an ancient evil awakening. That's the kind of thing young hot blooded adventurers get worked up over.”

“Ancient?” Susan, I mean Shoshanah, said dumbfounded. “Evil?” She was shaking now. “I am the law incarnate, and as is the word of law, I am also timeless!”

I watched as the sands around us twirled in strange shapes and rose off the ground. Hannah... Susan... Dammit. Shoshanah was starting to crackle with power, and I felt Rose becoming taut and ready to pounce with her claw inching toward the hilt of her sword. Irritated and acting on impulse I used the opportunity with both my arms free for the first time in about three hours to grab them both quickly by the back of the head and smashed them together in front of me. Susan yelped, and Rose shrieked in surprise. I didn't do it very hard, but when I let them go they retreated back and nursed the sore bumps on their foreheads.

“I said, enough.” I said nearly trembling with anger.

Now the two were backing down. Either could easily end my life in an instant, and I doubt that hurt either of them, but it was a battle for my affection, and witnessing me approach critical mass with my temper and lashing out was enough to bring them back to their senses.

I took some deep breaths and calmed myself so I could speak again, “Are we good now?”

While still rubbing their foreheads, they nodded in perfect sync.

“Good.” I said and then turned to Rose. “Let me say this again. Rose, you said you'd accompany me wherever I went. I'm grateful for that. You've been a great help, and without you I'd be in a much worse place, and that's saying a lot since we're in the middle of a desert like this right now.” I turned to Susan next, “Susan, I got you mixed up in my problems. Because of that I put you in danger, and I even ended up destroying your home. You've also saved and helped me, and you no doubt have your own reasons for following me, so I'm not going to turn you away either.”

Both their eyes shifted as I spoke with them. At least it looked like they were reflecting on how they had been acting since yesterday evening when the three of us emerged from the catacombs back onto the desert at dusk.

“Can we please put our differences aside and work together for now? I'm not naive enough to think it's going to be easy sailing once we get out of the desert. There's going to be more people like Zerin; I know that much. We still haven't even seen the other girls with him yet-”

“Oh them?” Rose said chipper once more. “You don't have to worry about them.”

“Wait, what?” I bumbled after being thrown for a loop once more.

“Those three chased after me before I found you. They didn't stop all day. Until finally I cornered them.”

“You cornered them while running away?” Susan asked skeptically.

“Okay. Fine. I ran into wall eventually, so I had to fight em. I knew I wasn't supposed to, Laven said I should lose em instead, but I couldn't so I fought em.”

“Don't tell me...” I said dreading the answer.

“What? No, silly.” Rose said with a smile. “I only broke the

elf's arm, dislocated the cat's leg and the girl in the armor was so slow I ended up outrunning her pretty easy."

She said it all so casually. I could only imagine how brutal the scene was actually.

"I got into a fight with the cat; she was pretty quick, so it was a lot of fun. The elf wouldn't stop shooting her sticks at me though. I asked her to stop a few times, but she didn't, so I broke her drawstring arm. The cat got pretty angry and tried to kick me, but the mood was ruined, so I grabbed her leg and twisted it the wrong way. The other girl had arrived so I ran at her. Then I remembered Laven said I should lose them instead, so I slid between her legs when she lifted a huge axe in the air and then ran back the way we came."

"So they're still alive?" I asked.

"Probably." She said casually. "What about Zerin?"

"Pulverized under a mountain of rubble and stone." Susan responded. "When I was saving Laven's life, I used my authority and control over the ruins to bring it down atop the heads of the boorish man and his diabolical servant."

She put a lot of emphasis on the 'I'. If I continued to get angry I'd stress myself out, so when Rose luckily didn't pick up on the provocation I decided to ignore it as well. I think it was safe to assume that Zerin was a goner, and his goons were in no condition to give chase. I had forgotten to take that all into account when we got back to the surface, so it was reassuring to know now.

Just how insane had Zerin been? What were his henchmen going to do once they discovered what happened to him? Perhaps they never will. His body, crushed under a thousand tons of rock, may never be found. I suppose I was to blame for what happened to him. I baited and goaded him into chasing me. If I had let Donald go, Zerin may very well still be around in Brun. No. That's not the right way to think about it. Zerin was a man who has killed a lot of people. Innocent and guilty, I don't know how many of either. Were those who were guilty really criminals though? After hearing him babble, I'm not convinced.

There appeared to be genuine menaces; I have to admit that much. After the orcs and the amazons that almost enslaved me, I would have to have quite the bleeding heart to think what they're doing is acceptable in any context. At the same time, there was Rose and

Susan here; they seemed so very different. Even Victoria, her story doesn't match up with what I've been hearing about monsters, in spite of the orcs and the amazons.

“Are we even certain we know where we are going?” Susan asked. She was speaking to Rose again, thank god.

“We've just been heading south. We'll reach the sea sooner or later. Can't miss the Free Ports along there.” Rose said with confidence.

“You cannot be serious.” Susan said in a droll.

Rose didn't say anything; she merely turned her head to the side and looked at Susan with a puzzled look on her face as if to say, 'what is wrong with that?'

Susan's tone became grave, “You are serious.”

“Where is your sense of adventure?” Rose asked.

“The Forgotten Kingdom, my homeland, which has transformed into a barren wasteland which harbors no life is not a park to frolic in. Every life was ended. Every tomb was plundered. Even that kingdom's name... The power of that treacherous god destroyed it. Even I, whose power dwells well below his own, can no longer speak its name. He may slumber, or he may have left for other pastures long ago... You may think it only fun and games for your own amusement, but this place is a serious hazard to myself and Laven.”

“Laven is fine from all dangers so long as I am here.” Rose said smugly.

“That is precisely why I am so very concerned at this current time.”

“Give it a rest, grandma.”

“Grandma? Grandma! How dare you! I have no children, and I have always been my Pharaoh's servant alone.”

“Ha ha! So you admit you're an old fogy?”

“I- Wha- No! That's not what's important!”

“Oh ho? So you don't deny it.”

“Why you incorrigible... Oh?” Susan's face suddenly twisted

from anger, to shock to a smirk. “That is why you're so... I see. I understand now.”

“What?” Rose asked earnestly.

“No. Do not mind me. I must be going senile. I must be imagining things.”

“What? What are you saying? Come on.” Rose was getting flustered, worried and agitated now.

It was painfully obvious that Susan had nothing, but Rose was a few chickens short of a full hen house to pick up on the fact that she was bluffing. All Susan had to do was play coy that she knew something that Rose didn't, and she fell for it hook line and sinker. Rose had more wit, but Susan was by far more clever. It was a comical and lighthearted scene compared to just before. Ever since they laid eyes on each other back in the tomb, they seemed able to escalate to the point where they would try kill each other. It was such an endearing scene to watch I almost didn't notice the beads of sweat on my forehead. I wiped it away, and I felt my forehead was hot, very hot. My hands twitched, and I realized that the two had let go and have been arguing for some time now pointing talon and claw at one another.

“Oh crap,” I said to myself as I wobbled back and forth.

Heatstroke.

Both the girls noticed me waver back and forth on the sand, and as I was about to fall over forward they rushed over and caught my dead weight before I face planted into the scalding hot sand.

They both called out desperately at the same time, “Laven? Laven!”

I felt a gentle warmth from Rose and a tingling sensation from Susan as my forehead cooled down, and my sun burnt skin turned from a hideous red to its natural white pinkish hue.

“Thanks.” I said with a parched mouth. “It's good to see you getting along now. I think... But can we get out of this desert first?”

Noticing my hoarse voice, they both reached for the water canteen at the same time. They locked eyes.

“Susan, let me.”

“No, Rose, allow me. And don't call me Susan!”

While Susan was distracted lecturing Rose, Rose pulled hard and ripped the canteen from her paws. Susan didn't even notice what had happened right away but threw herself back into the fray just before Rose was about to bring the lip of the canteen to my mouth.

“Wait! You cannot serve water to someone nearly unconscious like that. You'll waste precious water.”

Rose stopped, confused, which allowed Susan to pluck the canteen from her claws with ease. She tipped the canteen into her mouth and held a mouthful without swallowing. Brushing a lock of her black hair away with her paw, she leaned over me; her face got ever closer with my own, our lips almost meeting.

Noticing what was happening, Rose grabbed hold of Susan's long black hair with her claw and yanked her head back. With her mouth full, Susan stifled a yelp while Rose pinched her nose shut with her other free claw. Unable to breath, Susan was forced to swallow the water, after which Rose let her go. Susan coughed a few times and rubbed her throat with her paw and then turned her anger on Rose.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“I'm not stupid. I know what you're doing. You're trying to steal Laven away by playing dirty at a time like this. Well, I know a better way.” Rose picked up the canteen and casually said, “You just need a better way to hold onto it.”

She placed it between her cleavage, narrowed her shoulders and pinched her breasts together in her forearms. Amazingly it stuck right there. What the hell was she thinking now? One look at Susan was my answer. She was red faced and upset. In terms of size, she wasn't far behind, but I think Rose was using this of all times to rub it in.

Rose was leaning over me now “Now Laven, have a...”

“Not so fast!”

Rose was going to get away with it until Susan came to her senses. She grabbed the canteen without hesitation from between Rose's breasts and held it behind her back. Rose was furious and tried to grab it, but Susan was deft and predicted each swipe until Rose got

fed up and used brute force to grab one of Susan's arms and wrestled it to her front. They struggled and locked paws in claws, fingers interlocking between fingers, and continued having an arm wrestle, pushing back and forth on their wrists.

While they were fighting, growling and hissing at each other, the canteen fell from their attention. Luckily, I was able to reach out and catch it before it hit the sand. I brought it to my mouth and took a long hard swig from it to help get my strength back. The shared heat and healing helped me to ignore the environment here, but it also made me forget how thirsty I was. I only wished there was something with more kick in this canteen. Maybe some kind of hard liquor. I felt like I needed it right now.

Chapter 24

My grip on time and my sanity had finally reached a critical stage. I knew my stumbling had gone on for hours in this desert, but I wasn't even sure what time of the day it was anymore. If I looked up at the sun, it would permanently blind me. If I stared too far off into the distance, the hypnotic dancing mirage would make me sick to my stomach. That was how brutal the searing brightness punishing me was. There wasn't even a way to tell how much time had passed; the sand dunes which cast shadows had given way to an endless flat expanse. Maybe this horrid place was once a sea that dried up thousands of years ago? I don't know anything about curses; but for an entire sea to vanish like this, the curse that gripped this land was something else.

I was granted one reprieve that allowed me to hold onto my peace of mind; my companions had stayed quiet all day. Their constant bickering for the last while had started dying down. They too were scraping the bottom of the barrel to keep going. Even if Rose was immune to fire and heat, the amount of energy it was taking to share that with me was taxing. She'd eventually collapse from starvation; the calories she was burning to keep that kind of heat up couldn't last forever. Susan was a master of curses herself, and although this curse was pinned to this land by some all powerful god of destruction; she was able to keep protecting the three of us from it. At least somewhat. Even she wouldn't last forever, and it was feeling like the curse itself had eyes that were watching us, bearing down on us and trying to grind us into the sands and kill us. We had been persistent and stubborn for a couple of days now, but the curse was a patient hunter, and this was its lair.

So long as the two of them weren't pulling, pawing and rubbing themselves all over me while they bickered, threw insults and threatened one another... I would somehow manage to stay sane. If I was going to die in a horrid way, such as dehydrating, starving and burning to death, I would at least ask for it to happen quietly. I finally understood after the fourth day why no one had even been so far as to rob this place blind of any treasures buried under the sands. Amenenofru's tomb was a veritable treasure trove, anyone who had found it would have been a rich man, and his family would be set for years afterwards, but it certainly had the best defense system ever, buried beneath hell on earth.

Maybe it was noon? Late afternoon? I wasn't sure; but with my head slung low and rocking back and forth with every footstep, it took

everything I had to plod forward. A black shape suddenly broke the monotony of the dead salt and sand beneath me. I came to a sudden stop, and the salamander and anubis did so as well. I allowed my gaze to run up the length of the black shape which was a shadow until I reached its source. It was brown and tall with a rough exterior and several limbs. It remained motionless, stoic and boring as the land surrounding it. Despite that, my heart went crazy and beat furiously with excitement.

I took a few clumsy steps forward, and then I broke into a run. I fell to my knees before the shape and ran my fingertips over it gently, poking it with trepidation, but it was real. Real! It wasn't a mirage or some kind of trick; it was a tree. Under its shade I looked up and saw the sickly green of its leaves that swayed lazily.

“It's....It's real...” I said in a daze.

“Um... Laven?” Rose called out. “Are you okay?”

“It's alive!” I screamed out at the top of my lungs.

I wrapped my arms around the tree's trunk and hugged it tight and ran my heavily stubbled cheek against the rough bark with a wide smile plastered across my face. It was real. Days without end, days without even a sign of life. This reminded me that there was something other than sand, salt and rocks. I was ecstatic.

“Is he okay?” Rose asked again.

“I'm afraid it may be a minor case of psychosis brought upon by acute sunstroke.” Susan explained.

“He looks really happy...”

“He does, but we don't possess the liberty to remain here. This place is still near the curse, even if greatly weakened here; we shouldn't stay here.”

I didn't care about whatever conversation they were having. For days, I had known only death bearing down on me from above, blistering heat bouncing back into my face from below and the specter of death watching over my shoulder. If a tree had planted itself here, then this was a place of life. Life had become such a precious commodity to me; someone who was so used to it only a week ago. Maybe I was getting too familiar with- no. This is a joyous occasion. Who knows when I'll ever see something so beautiful as nature like

this ever again. This lone solitary and dwarf tree in the middle of nowhere was a monument that deserved respect and admiration.

“Come on Laven~ Time to go~” Rose sang cheerfully as she clasped down on my shoulders.

“No! No no no! Not now!” I yelled uncontrollably.

“He's getting worse.” Susan said gravely. “You'll have to pull him away by force.”

“But-” Rose muttered in protest.

“He'll shower you with his thanks posthumously. I said this place is cursed, this may very well still be an effect of it.”

Rose sighed and clamped down harder and pulled. In response, I wrapped my legs around the trunk as well, and Rose's arm snagged, unable to pull me away. With a grunt, she wrapped her left claw around my other shoulder and pulled harder than before. My fingers and muscles strained, but my joints had locked, and I was securely fastened to the tree. Rose was pretty weak herself after so many days in the desert, and even she stopped trying to yank me away eventually.

She turned to Susan and shrugged. The anubis let out a long irritated sigh and walked around to the other side of the tree. I didn't understand what- oh god no she's going to pry me free. With her paws, she dug into my legs though my pant legs and with groans of effort peeled back my limbs wrapped tightly around the tree. Rose doubled her efforts as well, and I felt my grip lesson until I was quickly pulled away from the tree. I felt a switch flip in my head; I swore I almost heard something snap inside my head and all the resistance my body was giving before simply vanished.

Rose, pulling as hard she could, fell over backwards when I suddenly let go, and Susan fell forward, face first into the trunk with a loud thud. Tangled in a mess, Rose and I groaned in a pile, and Susan whined and whimpered in pain as she held her nose between her paws.

“What- What the hell was that?” I said in a daze.

“Sum madder ob majik. Dis tree iz curzed.” Susan said, at least I think she said, she was having a hard time talking with her nose held and plugged like that.

Somehow Rose and I became untangled, and she stood up, mad as hell and stormed her way over to the tree.

“Wait! Roze, don't-” Susan shouted.

“Try to brainwash my husband, will you? Stupid tree!”

In one swift motion Rose drew her sword from the sheath on her back and sliced it through the tree diagonally. With a flourish, she returned it to its sheath, all in one big spectacular display. The tree remained as it was just for a second; the next moment it slid into two pieces as the top half fell to the ground.

“Rose! Do not hastily destroy the curse source whilst the affected party is still- Laven?”

Susan scrambled to her feet and ran toward me but stopped when she got a good look at me; her panicked face was replaced with surprise.

I looked right, left and at myself, “What?”

“You are not... Angry? Hurt?” She asked.

“What? Angry? No more than usual.”

“See? Nothing to worry about Hannah.”

“But that's- Will you cease calling me by any name you please!? My name is Shoshanah. Sh(o)-sha-nah”

“Whatever you say, Susan.” Rose said with taunting grin.

“You impertinent little-”

And the two of them were at it again. So much for the peace and quiet. What were they fighting over again? Why was I sitting on the ground?

“-and another thing you overgrown- ack! Laven!” Susan yelped, coming to her senses after trying to lecture Rose. “The curse!”

I was still trying to make sense of the situation when Susan knelt down, grabbed me by the shoulders and stared into my eyes. Rose was protesting behind her, ready to tear her away at any moment for being too physical with me and ignoring her. After a few seconds, she let out a sigh and released her grip.

“One inexplicable phenomenon after another.” She sighed.

“Can you slow down and explain what the hell is going on?”

“Do you not recall what has just happened, Laven?”

I froze on the spot. Other than walking through the desert, there hasn't been a single noteworthy event.

Susan held up her chin and nodded, “Yes. As I suspected. The curse was not undone-”

“Of course it was.” Rose interrupted. “I cut the tree in half. Duh.”

“The curse was NOT undone by destroying the tree.” Susan's voice stressed. “There would have been repercussions. Possibly a very worrisome and terrible backlash. However, this did not occur.”

“If you have a point to make, can you just say it?” I said irritated.

“Back in the tomb, you were also hit by an insidious and baleful spell of destruction, such as the likes I have never seen before. However, it did not destroy you. It mortally wounded you but not outright. Such an outcome was nigh impossible from the beginning.”

“Oh ho?” Rose chortled. “Have you finally figured it out?”

“Can you please remain silent while I- Figure out what?”

Susan was composed and on a steady train of thought, which came to a crashing halt. Her eyes went wide, and her ears perked up as she turned to face the smug Rose, standing with her arms crossed, a grin on her face.

“Figuring out Laven's secret weapon of course.” Rose cleared her throat, pointed a talon at Susan, then at me and declared, “That's because my husband... Is invincible!”

A gust of wind picked up and a slight howling breeze played the part of a larger unamused audience. Susan needed the help, a single person can only be exasperated so much.

Even Rose couldn't ignore the awkward silence, she coughed and continued, “Laven was doused with a bunch of holy

water too. It didn't do a thing."

"Holy water?" Susan's voice trailed off.

"I guess you wouldn't know about that." I said, stepping in to help the befuddled anubis. "Unless the church is thousands of years old, you wouldn't know. Apparently, it bursts into flames when it comes into contact with something called, 'demonic energy'. If what they call a soul is drenched in the stuff, well, it will go up in flames too."

"Laven was lost in the woods alone for a while. Then we met, then he got smacked around a bit, then I rescued him. There's no way he wouldn't have picked up some." Rose got a little flustered and pent her index talons together and spoke under her breath, "Even after our first night together..."

Susan's eyes could have been daggers, but she showed amazing control to swallow it back down and continue, "This might just be conjecture; but in light of all the evidence, I would have to conclude to that you, Pharaoh, possess a natural resistance to magic."

"No." Rose declared curtly. "My husband is invincible. Look."

I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. A clean sucker punch to the side of the head, and my sitting upright was soon corrected into my being laid flat against the dirt.

"See? Not a scratch."

"You imbecile! How dare you strike the Pharaoh.

"Wait!" I yelled. "No fighting!"

Susan watched an amazed look on her face as I righted myself and sat back up, but Rose's face was almost the same. I probably had a large welt on the top of my head from the blow, at least nothing was broken.

"Wha?" Rose bumbled. "That wasn't supposed to hurt you."

"I never said I was invincible, Rose. I said I could still break."

What I'm worried about is how not furious I am right now. I could probably categorize that smack against others Rose has hit me with before and rank the strength of that one really low. I think I was getting a little bit too used to this shit. Susan knelt down next to me and laid on paws. That is, she placed her paws on top of my head. Her

white exclamation tattoos glowed green, and a pale green light flowed into my head and the swelling and headache started to subside.

“Not invincible... That won't do!” Rose bellowed. “We have to fix that right away. We're going training, husband!”

Rose grab hold of my right arm and tried to pull me away only to match up against Susan in another tug o' war when she wrapped herself around my left arm.

“Cease your childish foolishness at once! Now is not the time for this.” Susan growled.

I struggled and tried to break loose of them both, but as I caught my breath to shout at the both of them to stop, my foot dug into the soft sand around us. I heard an ominous rattle, and when I looked down I saw something bleached white sticking out of the sand. It was round, cracked with pits and spotted with holes. Two very large ones right next to each other, and a smaller one between them and a little lower-

All the air in my lungs was let out in a scream, “Skull!”

The two of them stopped their little fight; their grips loosened enough that I easily scooted backwards away from the bones. Neither of them seemed very alarmed. I felt a little silly I was the only one freaking out, but I forgave myself when my placed one of my hands down in the backwards scuttle and something else rattled. My hand seized up and clenched on reflex, and I saw I accidentally dug up a whole femur. I felt queasy and dizzy for a second. I shook my head to get my senses back, and I tossed the bone away.

“Victims.” Susan declared soberly.

Rose drew her sword and began to turn around in circles looking for the enemy. No enemy came, at least nothing armed and ready for blood.

“Okay~ You got me.” A disembodied voice said playfully.

“What?” Was all I could mutter.

From the tree that had been cut, from the cut trunk a figure emerged. It had the shape of a woman, but it was just a luminescent figure of green light. That was until the light began to give way to fleshy pink skin. From the slash, a woman emerged. A woman from the hips

up that is; the girl looked like she was fused with the tree itself. She had flowing long and curly green hair the same color as the leaves, droopy and pointed elven ears, emerald green eyes and a sleepy expression. She had an ethereal aura around her along with a supernatural beauty, but she wasn't even wearing any clothes as if she had rolled out of bed naked. There was an overall presence just like that of Rose and Susan, so this couldn't be anything else other than another monster.

I stood up in a hurry and raised my guard. Susan leaped back, and Rose nearly pounced on the girl with her sword held high above her head.

The girl woke up in a hurry and flailed her arms in a panic, “Wait! Please stop! I'm not going to hurt you!”

Rose's sword came to a stop just a millimeter away from the girl's forehead. Beads of sweat rolled off it and onto the blade itself.

“Th-thanks?” The girl stuttered. “Like I said. I ain't going to hurt anyone. Besides, you already cut part of me in half already.”

“Who and what are you?” I asked.

“Oh? So you're who I smelled!”

Rose touched her sword against the girl's forehead and held it there. She panicked and flailed some more.

“No no no no! I'm not gonna do anything! Please!”

“Rose. I don't think she's a threat.”

Rose kept still for a moment but eventually relented and pulled back and sheathed her sword.

“You're lucky my husband is so nice.” Rose said in a huff.

Susan, during this time, was deep in thought again as she watched the tree with a discerning eye.

“You're the one with the curse, are you not?” Susan finally said.

“Ah ha ha ha.” The tree-girl laughed nervously rubbing the back of her head. “Yeah. Sorry about that. I don't really control it. I was also pretty excited, not many men come wandering this way. I gotta

make the best of every chance I get."

"You mean like these other chances?" Susan said, digging up another human bone with the bottom of her staff.

"Urk," the tree-girl made a noise in the back of her throat. "W-well that's from a long time ago, you see. I've been here for a long time. I don't do that kind of thing anymore."

"A long time?" Rose repeated dubiously. "You're a pretty small tree to have been here for a long time."

The girl's stuttering was without end, "W-well you see. It's just that- um, well you see. It's actually pretty-"

"Ah ha! I've got you now!" Rose declared drawing her sword again.

The girl threw her arms up to cover her head and cowered and squealed in terror.

"Rose. Stop."

I had to be the one to get Rose to back down again.

"You can look at the rings where you cut."

Indeed, there were plenty of rings inside that trunk. I wasn't about to start counting them; there were so many so close together that there was no way I was going to spend the rest of the day counting them all.

"Y-yeah. Listen to the man. He knows what he's talking about. You overgrown liz-"

"If she doesn't shut up, you can do what you want Rose."

That shut the girl up right away as she shrieked and threw her hands in front of her mouth to silence herself. Not a moment too soon as Rose looked ready to pounce again. She clicked her tongue and went back to standing at attention, letting her claw off her sword's hilt back to having her arms cross in front of her chest.

"The curse's origin is no doubt from this tree, Pharaoh." Susan declared. "And these bones, they are very old. Just like she said. No doubt more than two hundred years old."

"Before monsters were what they are today. That's what

you're saying, right Susan?”

“Yes, exactly- Pharaoh!”

I flinched.

“Do not call me by that name!”

“Whoa whoa! Sorry, it’s just I got caught up in-”

“I have a proper name! I demand the two of you call me by it!”

“Calm down Hannah,” Rose said, heavy in mockery. “It's just a name.”

“Do not encourage him! Do not encourage her!”

The three of us had retreated; Susan was wavering her arms around, mad as hell, lecturing the two of us. Meanwhile, the tree was feeling a little drained and getting resentful about being so readily ignored.

The girl spoke up, “Can I go now?”

Rose drew her sword and spun around to face the tree who squealed in fear. I had to throw myself in front of Rose to get her to stop in time. When Rose backed down disappointed, the tree-girl deflated in relief.

I turned around, “Okay. What's with all the bones?” I asked.

“Well...” She stopped as if conditioned to be afraid for her life. Noticing no impending death, she continued, “I've been here for a long long time. A long time ago, in this place, I kind of... Well. Ate people who walked by.”

“You ate people?”

“Yeah. Wait! Not anymore! You gotta believe me. A long time ago people would wander the desert, see me here, then they'd be charmed and waste away under me.”

“And turn into fertilizer...” I said finishing off her speech.

“Yeah! That. Except, I don't do that anymore. Really, I don't. I just, well, when someone comes exploring this part of the desert, I

just offer... comfort... A nice fling in exchange for some life energy."

"A tree spirit." Susan said. "It has been a long time, but I see even spirits are not immune to this odd affliction which has overtaken this world. Turning 'monsters' into these new forms."

"Yeah, that! I don't really remember much past two hundred years back. Those bones are from before then. Really. I don't know anything about them."

I found that all a little hard to believe, but I saw Susan nodding in agreement.

"Yes. I thought as much. I too do not remember much, especially about myself earlier than two hundred or so years ago."

"Is there a point to this?" Rose said becoming deflated and bored herself.

"Quiet, lizard." Susan snapped.

Rose seemed so unfocused she didn't even react.

"Ahem." Susan coughed clearing her throat. "I thought it odd that I was missing so much of my memories. I do recall nearly every day since then."

"So that's why you were so close to tears over how lonely you were?" I asked.

Susan remained still and motionless for a moment, until she flushed red.

"W-what! No. Absolutely not. I was not lonely. I was on duty. My being alone has nothing to do with anything!" She was heaving heavy breathes, but she quickly regained her composure and tried to continue like I hadn't said anything. "These bones are certainly not recent. That said, I see no reason to have this spirit executed for murder."

"A heh heh heh~" The tree-girl giggled nervously. "Thanks?"

"However!" Susan suddenly yelled, pointing her staff at the girl. "For attempting to seduce and put the Pharaoh in harms way. I sentence you to-"

"Wait wait wait!" The girl flailed. "I didn't mean to! I didn't

know he had others with-"

Susan's tone was even more solemn this time, "I sentence you to dea-"

"Noooooo please! I know. You want out of the desert right? Right? If you let me live, I can point the way. I send people, all the men I catch, that way. Sometimes they even come back, so it's gotta be the right way. Right?"

"To dea-"

I threw myself in front of Susan this time, "Hold on Shoshanah. We can make that kind of exchange."

Susan thought about it for a moment, "Very well, she will reveal the path out of the desert. Then I sentence her to-"

"Enough with the sentencing. We'll call it a plea bargain. Alright? A little mercy?"

Rose chimed in, waving her talon in Susan's face, "See? See? I told you he's a good person. He ain't even holding a grudge. Even if she deserves it."

Susan let out a long sigh.

"If the Pharaoh says so. I will relent, this time."

She lowered her staff, and the tree-girl stopped shaking fear.

"Yes. Well. Before you change your minds." The tree-girl pointed in a direction, "If you go that way for about a day, you'll get outta the desert. I think one guy called the place Vilmheim, or something like that."

"Vilmheim?" Rose parroted.
"You know it Rose?" I asked.

"Yeah. We've skipped a bunch of little places south of Brun. It's a pagan place. No church guys there. They won't be coming after anything there; not right away I bet."

I finally relaxed and let out a big sigh. Maybe for once we'd have a place to center ourselves again. Maybe a nice bed and reliable food and drink. I think I've had enough desert for now, hopefully for the rest of my life.

“Oh. Sorry. Just one more thing. If you met anyone else along the way, maybe point em this way? I'm getting a little-”

Rose and Susan turned around brandishing their sword and staff at the tree-girl.

“Eek! R-right, forget I said anything then. I'll j-just fix how you dismembered me and not bother you again.”

With that goodbye, the girl melted back into the tree and there was silence again.

“Alright! Vilmheim!” Rose cheered jubilantly. It's been a few years. Really nice friendly place.”

I hope she was right. We picked up our things and made our way, leaving the lone tree in the middle of nowhere behind. I saw Susan making marks in the dirt. Probably some kind 'been here' markings. I didn't know why she'd- oh. That's why. If that tree was lying, she wanted to make sure she'd know how to get back here. I decided to make a mental note. This anubis likes to hold grudges, try not to anger.

Chapter 25

Verdant green fields, fallow hills and lush meadows, that was the blissful scenery the three of us were treated to. From cruel desert sands and barren salt plains to crude uninhabited savanna which suddenly gave way to life. A mixture of tall pine and leafy trees stretched out in the three directions before us. It made the previous days seem like a cruel lie. The air was heavy with dew and the smell of spring. It was so heavy with life that the crushing feeling on my shoulders had all but vanished. The curse which hounded us, tortured us, was long gone.

Now that doom incarnate was no longer watching over my shoulder, my mind was free to wander once more. All the effort I put into salvaging my sanity and keeping my stiff dead legs moving forward could be spared, and my first thoughts were just how improbable this whole world is. Those were dangerous thoughts before, much like wondering why the feral beast is gnawing on your leg. “How did this happen?” the man who is soon to die will think. The answer to that question can come later, after you save your life and maybe your leg if you're lucky. Thinking is the last thing to do in that situation; it is much better to do, just as I kept walking instead of wasting all my efforts thinking why all that had to happen to me.

Ignoring my two companions and the slew of other fantastical creatures I've met, this world itself betrays my every expectation. The shortness of the days, length of night, the climate and the vegetation all seemed off to me. Even if it was spring we had to be somewhere north of sixty. If this world was as big and not larger or smaller than Earth, my guess at our current latitude meant that desert—and what it had been—had no reason to exist.

I saw visions of what that place looked like; it belonged a good thirty degrees latitude south, so why would it exist in a place like this? No matter how long I thought about it nothing made sense. Nothing added up. A few thousand years, even ten thousand years passing didn't seem like enough. Were there powers at work here in this world beyond my understanding? Was Susan's talk of gods not just ceremonial but literal? Some sort of destruction god tricked the people of that kingdom, descended upon it and then promptly destroyed it completely within a decade? Was that scar in the landscape, the barren sands and the curse all his doing? If all the other gods are long gone, including him, why is that one god's power alone still active? Perhaps answers to those mysteries are still buried beneath the sand, but I wasn't ready to go back, not ever.

I was still flanked on either side by the two girls. Every so often they would argue with one another, but so long as I was between them, they didn't seem so keen to start throwing punches. Maybe the irritation went away along with the looming feeling of doom? Maybe the competition over who was going to be the one to save my life from the curse was over? Since no one was bragging, and they were still at each other's throats, neither had confidence victory was theirs. The current truce may lie in the common goal we faced, the promise of a warm bed and roof over our head.

We had run completely out of food and water, but with life now surrounding us Rose was free to run rampant. She was a vicious hunter, not patient, diligent or professional, and the small animals she brought back were mangled instead of caught. Anything would do right now though. Rose almost didn't set out, but our rumbling stomachs, hers being the loudest, eventually moved her to leave the camp. She was apprehensive about leaving her rival alone with me, but even I knew full well it wasn't within Susan's character to do anything. Wasn't it?

A few nuts, berries, tubers and grasses were accessible to Susan and me, so we did our part. The portions to feed the three of us were quite minuscule; we were still going to be marching hungry. If I complained I was afraid these two would shovel theirs onto my plate. They have their pride as do I, so such a thing would be unthinkable for me. Besides, if anything were to happen, it's them who would need their strength, not me.

Susan was diligently working without a word until I began boiling a pot of water over the makeshift campfire Rose had started before leaving. Susan was sitting on her knees on the opposite side of the fire and had been for some time. I didn't notice she had been watching and studying me until I happened to look up and make eye contact.

The moment I did she asked immediately, "Why go through such lengths to boil water so thoroughly? The ingredients are not yet prepared for our meal."

I wasn't prepared for the question, and I sat back up away from the pot. My eyes wandered left and right while my brain jostled back to its senses.

"Why would I boil water? So I don't get cholera?" I answered

dubiously.

I thought that would have been a suitable enough answer, but the anubis's ears twitched, and her brow furrowed. My sarcastic answer didn't seem to improve her mood or sate her curiosity.

“Pharaoh, even I will not excuse you for poor manners...”

Now was the time to backpedal. She was holding back a trembling voice as well as her temper.

“A disease. Okay? A bacterium that likes stagnant water. I'd rather not get sick.”

“Bacterium?' She asked inquisitively.

Susan's tail was now wagging back and forth behind her, slapping the dirt behind and to the left and right of her. Her ears perked up, and her frown vanished into a wide eyed expression.

“Tiny little organisms, they multiply quickly and make the body sick. These make you... well...”

“Make you what? Pray tell.”

She was getting a little excited and leaned forward. I had to look away because her eye contact was getting a little intense.

“Well... They wait in water, reproduce inside the digestive system, and then make the body sick so it expels water back out and through. Then there's more water with them to keep the cycle going and make it worse.”

I was a little embarrassed talking about such a thing, with a girl that is... Well I suppose I had to admit despite her demeanor and appearance, she was still a girl after all. Even if she tried to act so mature all the time only to have a near temper tantrum at the drop of a hat. I stole a glance back at her to see her reddish brown eyes were sparkling.

“How is it that you know this is true? That water appears clear to me. Are you saying they are so small they cannot be seen? What would lead you to believe they exist at all?”

“Well, if you get something magnify your vision enough... you can see them.”

Susan sat back up, rested her weight on all fours and started to crawl around the fire toward me. I wasn't all there, so I didn't react right away when she started moving closer toward me with sparkling eyes. When I did, I scooted back a bit and ran into a tree trunk pretty quickly. I didn't have anywhere to go when the anubis had one paw between my legs, and her eyes were level with my own looking directly at me. I was getting flushed and turning red, I could feel it.

“Is that knowledge you know from your world?” She said with gushing curiosity.

“W-well, yes.” I blustered.

Wait a moment. What did she just?... When did I ever mention to her?...

Before Susan could press even closer, her head suddenly jolted back. She let out a yelp and series of whines. A pair of claws pinched around one of her ears and yanked her backwards. Standing behind her, with a bunch of small animals, rabbits, squirrels and birds, held under her arm like a bundle of logs, was Rose. Her face betrayed that she was quite pissed.

“Oh? Oh ho ho? What's this?” Rose said; her forced laughter dripping with venom. “I leave for a few minutes, and you go into heat?”

Susan didn't back down; she was defiant and did not sound apologetic, “Release me at once you troglodyte! We were about to have an important conversation.”

“Sure you were.” Rose said drawing out her voice in mocking suspicion. “I didn't expect proud Hannah to do something like-”

“My name is not Hannah!”

Their fight was about to continue when both their stomachs gurgled loudly in unison. In perfect sync, they rested a hand on their stomach and lost their will to fight. Retreating from their battle, they went their separate ways: washing, chopping, skinning and butchering. Rose dropped it all into the pot I had prepared. My pot of what was once fresh boiled and safe water. I didn't even have the strength to protest. I suppose a stew is good enough. It wouldn't do much for my parched throat though... Even Susan didn't pick a fight on my behalf; she just merely dropped a slew of plants into it for seasoning.

With our first fresh meal in days, we all greedily plunged into it, ravenously sating our hunger. It was a different kind of silence, besides all the slurping and crunching. The second to my dismay, and apparently to Susan as well, because Rose didn't seem to have bothered to debone the game. She merely pulverized and crushed the bones with her jaws and razor sharp teeth. Rather than getting myself swept up in the array of uncouth table manners and culinary blunders, I decided I needed to ask some important questions. Such as 'where the hell are we going anyways?'

So I asked Rose directly, “You said we were going to Vilmheim, I guess we're technically there, but what is this place? You were excited about it...”

Rose perked up from her bowl, a rabbit bone sticking out from her mouth; she looked at me and crunched down on the bone with a sickening snap. Hardly chewing, she swallowed her mouthful.

With a chipper voice she replied, “Yeah! I've been here before. About a year ago. It was being invaded at the time, I signed up for some mercenary work. It was a really good fight!”

Just a year ago this place was a war zone? Maybe it still is. Could I really be so relived and excited to be out of the desert and back into a place like this? I really needed to start readjusting my expectations about everything Rose said.

“You most certainly are not taking us into a war zone.” Susan said, voicing her concerns. “We will not be gallivanting into danger just for your amusement.”

“Huh?” Rose hissed intimidatingly. “I said I was here a year ago. If there was still fighting, I wouldn't have left.” Looking back at me with a polar opposite switch in sweetness she chirped to me, “Of course then I would have never met you, husband, so I'm glad it ended quickly.”

“And will you cease referring to the Pharaoh as your 'husband'? I never permitted that kind of arrangement, and I never shall! I thought I may tolerate your babbling, but I've had quite about enough of it.”

Rose's tail popped, and a couple of embers flew off. The hair on Susan's tail began to stand on end, and they both started to bare fangs at each other.

“You can't tell me what to do, and we were married long before you showed up, so back off mutt!”

“Mutt!? You credulous little-” She took a deep breath and returned to her calm and stoic face. “Yes, that is correct. I will tell you what to do. I am the guardian of Pharaoh Laven, and as the watcher over his family I will have the final say about such things! I won't have some lowborn thug such as yourself sully the bloodline.”

Just one quick meal later, and the two of them had the energy to once again bite at the others throat. I could see sparks flicker in the air when their gazes met one another.

“Can you two knock it off?” I said. “I want to make it to this place today. We're close enough for that. Aren't we Rose?”

Rose snapped back from her glaring contest with Susan and went deep into thought.

“Well, I guess...”

“Okay, good enough.” I said abruptly, cutting her off. “Then let's get moving.”

Maybe if there were bystanders and witnesses other than myself, these two would keep the peace. Until I managed to drill it into their heads that fighting was not allowed, there needed to be something else to prevent the two of them from killing each other. It was still early afternoon with maybe another five hours left until we would have to spend another night in the wilderness. Another night with these two fighting over me while I try to sleep. I'm not sure they'd last another night like that without bloodshed. Maybe I was overreacting and paranoid, but I'd rather not risk it.

As the day went on, and our journey through the woods, down animal paths and toward what I hoped was civilization, I began to regret bringing up Vilmheim at all. The look of resignation and looseness of Susan told me she felt the same way. Ever since Rose mentioned Vilmheim, she would not stop talking about the fights and battles she took part in there. I suppose saying that would sound strange; such stories should be interesting, but Rose had a disjointed and hard to follow style of storytelling. She was so eager to tell her stories to me that she did so walking backwards to fully convey each expression and moment of excitement with wide swings of her arms. She. Just. Wouldn't. Stop. Perhaps my irritation was due to how jealous I was of her having so much energy where I did not.

She nearly smacked me across the face once or twice while waving her arms around. She didn't notice at all, such was her usual level of excitement while talking about old exploits. If you ignore the excruciating details of every bone she broke, sword swing she swung and person she made soil themselves on the field of battle, they might sound heroic. She spoke so quickly each story blended together into another; I couldn't make heads or tails of any. The face of pure joy and excitement on her face though... I dared not stop her, I'm not sure her heart could take it, and my own conscience wouldn't be able to bear looking at her after.

While she continued to regale us with her war stories, the three of us continued plodding our way through the countryside. This was the first time I had the luxury of enjoying the scenery this world had to offer. These two girls may have their own agenda, but I was confident they didn't have anything malicious planned. I had been exposed to the kind of cruelty the inhabitants of this would could dish out, and these two were thankfully removed from it. They had their own jealously and greed, but it was a small price to pay for the security. With that security —and clarity that came with it—I enjoyed the untouched scenery from every hilltop: the fish spawning in the streams, the wild deer grazing and leaping through the bushes, birds tweeting in the trees and rodents scurrying and scampering about. I'm sure under some rock there was a centipede or something, but I wasn't going to be bothered with such things for now.

For the first time since arriving here, I felt like this was a real adventure. The journey through the desert probably counted, technically, but that was more of a death march than a hike through the woods. I would rather prefer to forget about it completely. My mind instead wandered back to the wildlife; the trees and animals from deer to spider crawling on its web, they all seemed very familiar. This world didn't seem to have its own unique wildlife. The geography was unfamiliar, so were the presence of the monsters, magic and works of gods, but everything else seemed exactly the same as Earth. It was another mystery, maybe one that would help solve all the other ones. Maybe this world wasn't so far removed from my own after all?

It took an hour to scale one particularly difficult animal path up a sharp path on a small mountain. I could have sworn it was more a goat path, but Rose, who had taken the lead, seemed determined to tackle it, and Susan didn't protest. When the three of us finally came over the peak, we saw the promised land stretched out before us. With a river running through it and farmers' fields stretching out in all

directions around it was a city. Thatched and wooden gable roofs, stone and brick buildings and a thick imposing stone wall encompassing the entirety. At its center, elevated on a small hill, was a large castle keep protected by its own stone wall. Beyond the outer wall was what appeared to be some sort of 'new town', a sprawling expanse of wooden buildings which trickled and thinned out until it eventually became the surrounding farmlands and fields of wheat.

Plumes of smoke from hundreds of chimneys billowed into the sky; the sky still dominated by the bright yellow sun making its way across the sky toward the horizon. We still had a few hours of daylight; a straight line would take us to the walls of this city within that time. It was a welcome change from having to make camp on the dirt beneath the stars once again; even though there was no longer any sand to get into everything. There would be a bed, maybe another hot bath... Okay, now is not the time to think about that, not after the last time that still seems fresh in my mind...

I think my excitement was being mirrored by the others. Neither of them seemed ready to slow down and wait until tomorrow to get there. Rose excitedly declared it was Vilmheim and doubled her pace. Susan and I were hard pressed to keep up with her, but Rose seemed to have knack for picking the path of least resistance through the forest which grew thick as we came down from the barren and rocky mountain top. There wasn't any time for words; I heaved heavy breaths and sweated up a storm to keep pace with her. An oasis of civilization was waiting, something I had so dearly missed.

There was almost a feeling of nostalgia as we emerged from the wilderness and into the field of wheat. It was just like the first time when Rose and I emerged from the woods near Brun. Rose was nowhere near as rigid as she was then. Before she repressed her feelings knowing full well the consequences they might bring. Now she was doing no such thing. Had she forgotten? Susan seemed oblivious; she had been holed up in a tomb for who knows how many thousands of years. Everything was new, but she didn't seem too impressed. Maybe those cities of old were something else completely?

Susan was calm as always, as calm as she is when Rose or I don't push her buttons. She may draw attention, seeing as how rare a monster she is, but her behavior was hardly the kind the Church seemed so panicked about. Rose's overt excitement had me worried though.

“Rose, are you sure it's okay to go in so brazenly like this?” I

asked.

"Hmm?" Rose hummed puzzlingly. "Of course! This isn't Brun. Vilmheim is a pagan country. They don't hunt monsters or anything like that."

"She speaks the truth." Susan nodded in agreement. "There is no law or edict which outright prohibits the residency or transit of monsters."

Rose actually having some knowledge to impart was surprising but not unreasonable. But how would Susan know anything? That was the real surprising part. Just how did she...

"There are demon realms inside Vilmheim. A real odd setup, but it seems to have worked so far." Rose continued. "Maybe that's why it gets invaded every so often by crusades?"

Now things make sense. That is why this place is a flash point. If monsters are tolerated, even a little, the Church of the Almighty would probably see this place as a punching bag. Brun seemed heavily under the Church's influence. Perhaps the same was true for the other nations around here? Demon Realms though, Donald had said they were areas completely under the control of monsters. Realms ruled purely by lust. I would assume civilization would crumble under such extreme conditions.

I had to ask, "Wait. We're just waltzing right into a demon realm?"

Rose looked at me sideways as though I had something odd, "No. If this were a demon realm there'd be orgies everywhere or something like that. I haven't seen one yet, so I guess Vilmheim still just had them on the border."

"Wha?" I bumbled.

"Special zones given special rights, but without rights to move freely." Susan chimed in. "I see. So these zones would be buffer zones protecting the believers of the old gods..."

"Hold on." I interrupted. "What are you two talking about?"

"Better to see for ya'self, Laven!" Rose cheerfully shouted.

Taking me by the hand, she pulled and broke off into a run. Susan with quick reflexes grabbed onto my other hand, maybe trying

to stop her, but ended up only followed behind and being pulled as well. She was shouting her protests to Rose who kept running. There was probably no difference between her not hearing or ignoring her. No one was going to stop this girl, that was what the smile on her face told me. Emerging from the wheat fields and onto the road, we very suddenly surprised the other travelers on the road; we were three oddballs, all hand in hand. Rose looked frantically left and right to get her bearing and continued her run toward the city.

The people of this city didn't look at all different from the people of Brun, it seemed we hadn't crossed a boundary in ethnicity or language, but their reaction to the three of us was a world of difference apart. The people of Brun looked at us like we were predators in the distance, not an immediate threat but to be watched cautiously and with fear. People here looked at the three of us like a novel scene. To see the ever jubilant and energetic Rose drag the tired and weary Susan and me behind her was apparently worth a laugh and a smile.

Susan was the odd one out; she certainly dressed differently and looked different from anything the people were used to. It made sense though; she was an anubis and, if she was to be believed, possibly the last one. A monster type which had not been seen in thousands of years was bound to be a spectacle. I wasn't sure if she was blushing from all the attention on her or because she was being dragged along so comically.

The further we traveled down the road, the thicker and more dense the crowds became. Farmland with busy farmers, shepherds and cattle hands was replaced with hamlets and townsfolk out and about in quaint local market places. An odd troupe such as ours marching through was greeted with friendly waves and hellos, the same shared between everyone else on this winding road to the city center. Stall owners shouted at us to advertise their wares, and children followed the spectacle the best they could. Among the masses of ordinary people, I spotted what made this place unique other than the friendly disposition of the locals. Monsters.

They lived and worked so naturally among the other people; it was surprising. I spotted all kinds, a girl who looked part cow, with bovine-like legs, horns from her head and fuzzy cow like ears drooping from her head. She had a young infant, that looked like a small calf-like version of herself, breast feeding on her more than ample bosom. Sitting next to her was a young man; shoulder to shoulder they sat next to each other with blissful looks on their faces. Another girl, with a pair of large floppy and slimy antenna sticking out from her head, had

oily moist skin, and rather than legs, she had a slimy slug's tail which I almost mistook for a dress. With hands joined, maybe stuck, together, she was walking...crawling with a young man. They stole lazy glances at one another and shared smiles. The man had to take short gradual steps while the girl pulled herself slowly. It was painfully slow, but they both looked happy regardless.

There didn't seem to be any shortage of them. They stood out, but the more I looked, the more they seemed to be in the minority. The majority, more than eighty percent, were regular human couples from young lovers to old married couples. Most of the people were busy working, shopping or going somewhere. All of them out and about like this, it certainly was spring after all. This place seemed as nice a place as any, but Rose still didn't stop, not even for a moment.

“Isn't this place good enough? Seems friendly enough. Why not just find an inn here and...”

“No. Not here. It's safest beyond the wall.” She turned around and showed me a bright smile. “Don't worry, I can get us in.”

I didn't know what she was thinking, but even Susan seemed to have a dubious and furrowed expression on her face after hearing Rose dodge of the question.

We walked through the new town and between its straight streets and wooden buildings. The large stone wall which separated it from the older city towered above. It was an ancient structure. It stood ten meters tall and must have been three meters thick. The old town inside must be almost two square kilometers, so just building that wall with whatever ancient tools and knowledge were available was a feat in and of itself. Now that we were close, the damage to the wall was obvious. It lent more proof toward there being a battle here recently, and some other older looking marks meant there have been many battles here over this wall's long history. The dirt road finally brought us to the gate house; it towered high above the wall. A thick imposing portcullis hung overhead, and a large wooden door blocked the rest of the massive archway. A smaller wooden door had been opened, big enough to let carts through one at a time, each one being waved through by a team of guards standing ready.

A bigger city means more security. A city of this size would have its own army for a garrison who would also play the part of the police. But ten, no, fifteen heavily armed guards seemed a little extreme. The people seemed to move freely outside, but perhaps who

got into the inner city was strictly regulated? I was going to find out soon when Rose barreled her way forward. She even had the audacity to push forward and cut in line, much to the frustration of the other cart drivers and travelers waiting patiently in line.

The guards noticed her approach quickly; once we got close enough that they realized two of us were monsters they raised their guards and their dreary faces from the daily grind of immigration control was wiped away.

“Hold it right there!” One of them shouted, decorated with extra plumage and most likely the senior officer.

These guards were a world of difference from the militia standing outside Brun. They wore thick barbutes and chain mail tunics that stretched down to their ankles and waved around heavy and thick halberds. Their eyes darted out from behind the slits; these were not eyes which were afraid; they were ready to fight.

Instead of stopping, Rose only slowed down as she rifled through her bags. She produced her guild papers and held them up at eye level as she marched forward until finally coming to a complete stop only just before the officer. Behind him were fourteen other soldiers with halberds lowered and ready to thrust and chop at a single command. Rose was getting carried away again...

“Guild Business.” Rose said. That's all she said.

The officer bent down and looked at the seal and the contents written upon it closely. From behind the slits in his helmet I saw his eyes widen underneath.

“The Thorn Knight?” he said with his mouth now agape.

The other soldiers behind him stepped back in unison. They raised their halberds into the air and stood down. There was a clamor behind us, voices birthing and throwing fresh rumors around. Rose just gave another one of her wide toothy smiles.

“That's right. I'm going into the city now.”

“W-wait a minute.” The officer said, mustering his courage. “The other...”

“My husband.” She said so bluntly.

Now she did it. The talking behind us exploded. Rose, what the hell were you doing?

“Come on now, Laven. Let's go.”

“Hold. It. Right. There.” Susan said, each word deliberate and with power. “Was this your plan?”

Rose turned around and shrugged, unable to wipe that smile off her face.

“I see.” Susan said calmly. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I am disappointed... To think you regard my capabilities this much lower than your own.”

She let go of my hand and stepped forward beside Rose and faced the guard. Everyone noticed her presence now, Rose had started the show, but now everyone couldn't help but watch the spectacle and marvel at the novelty of the anubis, a monster no one gathered here has seen or heard of before today. That didn't stop the guards from slowly lowering their halberds to ready themselves again.

She took a deep breath, “Under the Edict of King Freylon IV, the monster control law of 1201, I am required to identify and show proper documents. However...” She stressed that word a little hard. “Under the edict of Queen Gresick III, the religious freedoms law of 784, high ranking religious figures possess diplomatic immunity and freedom of movement within Vilmheim that will not be limited under any reason other than an act of war or at the request of that sect's leadership. That is an extension of the greater Central Empires international law of diplomatic immunity for heads of state all countries must respect. Therefore, as the High Priestess of Anubis I possess such a right to move freely within your boarders. Wherever I please.”

Wait... What? How did she... What did she just?

The officer was more taken aback than I was, “Wait just a second. Priestess of what?”

I see. The officer's confusion was just like my own. At least I wasn't the only one.

Susan slammed her staff into the ground, and it illuminated with a brilliant flash of white light. Her entire body radiated with that warm light that was hard to look at. Everyone present shielded their eyes.

“If you seek proof of divine power, and by extension my rank, then allow me to demonstrate further if that is required. However, know that my patience is now limited. If you wish for me to take this matter to your superiors and voice my great displeasure at your rudeness, then that will come to pass soon as well.” Susan said, each word echoing with ethereal power. It was commanding. Divine.

“Alright! Alright.” The officer pleaded, “That's good enough, please madam, that's more than enough. All we need now is to know who the man is-”

Rose and Susan spoke at the same time at the same volume, “My King/My Husband.”

They turned on each other, mad the other was trying to butt in.

“He is with me.” Susan barked.

“No! He's with me.” Rose hissed.

"I'm privy to powers beyond your understanding, Lizard."

"Just a fancy light show. If you want to heat things up, I'll show you what real flame can do."

While the two of them were exchanging threats and dangerous gazes, complete with sparks and clenched fists, I slipped between them and approached the officer by myself.

“Just let us through, and I'll get them both under control.”

I didn't mean for it to come off as a threat, but the guards were obviously quite frightened now. They weren't armed, ready or probably trained for this. All the other people in line behind us had already scrambled to pull back to a safe distance, and a crowd had started growing since some time ago. The officer nodded and yelled at the other to stand down and that they did, in quite a hurry too. They parted to let us through.

“Rose. Susan.” I said sternly.

The two of them twitched and looked away from each other and back to me. Their faces were full of concern and dread. I turned around slowly trying to put on a calm and professional smile.

“We can go now.” I said, calmly... I think.

Both their faces were complicated. Maybe I wasn't doing a good job at hiding my own emotions, whatever they were. I wasn't sure myself where I lay between relief, anger, confusion and panic. The three of us walked under the portcullis and into the inner city while the spectators remained silent. I wasn't sure what consequences this little scene the two of them showed off was going to cause, but the rumor mill was going to churn out some pretty interesting things by tomorrow. I'd get an explanation from both of them, later.

Chapter 26

Past a foreboding gate blocked by a looming portcullis, a thick imposing wooden door and a squadron of heavily armed guards was Vilmheim proper. This old part of town was scarred and beaten, and signs of a battle waged long ago and not so long ago were readily apparent. Buildings in this town were all made of stone and brick, and those near the walls wore the same downtrodden wear and tear. For the first hundred meters or so were burnt or completely razed buildings, some with holes like a bowling ball had been hurled though, some with completely missing walls and roofs stripped away. Neither was an uncommon sight.

The people beyond the wall seemed no different from those outside, which surprised me because with the checkpoint leading inside I was expecting some sort of segregation. Instead of less monsters like I expected, there were actually a few more. The people milling about were very amiable with each other, with pats on the back and smiles all around. If I had to guess, my guess would be that the only difference is that within these walls were just the card carrying citizens of Vilmheim itself. A tight knit community, no doubt forged from being besieged behind these walls. The town outside—made of wood, clay and cobbled together hastily—was probably wiped out more than a year ago, but I suppose with concentrated effort and enough people it could be erected or rebuilt rather quickly.

Perhaps many of them were not passing through but were refugees? Only so many of them could be merchants even though they lined the market places outside and were thick like thieves, each one was aggressively trying to sell their wares. It was actually a lot calmer in the old city itself. The same cloud of romance hung in the air as it did outside. Perhaps that was the one thing the outer and inner city shared; any tension was hard with all these lovestruck couples waltzing around. It was hard to keep an eye on any one couple for long, and they all blended into the mass of the evening market as everyone shopped for dinner. The sun was beginning to turn orange on the horizon by now.

With the people milling about, busy as bees, they paid little attention to the three of us, even with the commotion we had caused at the gate. Carts clacked as they wheeled over the cobblestone road. A thousand boots, paws, hooves and claws clicked against the street as well. Many people and monsters of all different types, color, size and species marched to and fro. Everyone seemed busy; they didn't appear to have any time to pay attention to the three of us. I was glad

that we finally found somewhere that we might actually be able to disappear for a little while. What goes on outside the city walls was probably of nobody's concern so long as it wasn't an army on the march. Even after the little stunt these two girls pulled we just might have until tomorrow before everyone knows about it. Which reminded me...

I got the two girls' attention and crooked my finger to beckon the two of them closer.

“Team huddle.” I said.

The two of them still looked nervous and exchanged quick glances with one another, but they came closer and bent their heads forward, mimicking myself as I was forming one point of a huddle. When they were both leaning over to my left and right, instead of wrapping my arms around their shoulders, I grabbed their heads and bonked them together with a loud audible clonk. They both yelped in surprise; but with my hands still on their heads, I let it all out.

“What the hell was that about?”

After wincing, mostly in surprise, as I doubt I could hurt them physically, they both started speaking at once. They cut off and interrupted one another, and it became a jumble of words that didn't make sense.

“Rose... Weren't you worried the guild would cancel your membership if that kind of news got out?”

Rose's eyebrows furrowed, and her lips frowned as she went deep into thought. The lack of any wheels turning in her head was a deafening silence and soon revealed exactly what I feared. She merely shrugged and knocked her own head lightly with her fist and stuck her tongue out with a razz. Oh for fuck's sake...

Now I wasn't going to even bother trying to reprimand Rose, so I turned my attention to Susan. She jumped a little when my eyes suddenly shifted in her direction.

“And what was that little light show going to accomplish? We're trying to keep a low profile.”

Susan managed to muster herself and respond immediately, albeit flustered, “W-well, a god does not conduct themselves in a manner that is subtle. Neither should a king.” She turned to Rose, “W-

wouldn't you agree?"

Rose titled her head at Susan, "Stubble? Well, it does look good on Laven, but I don't know what you're talking about."

Susan and I both squinted our eyes shut on reflex. That one hurt.

And that Gods and Kings angle again... I wasn't going to get through to her either. Her head wasn't as thick as Rose, but she was an order of magnitude more stubborn than Rose is.

"Alight..." I said covering my face with the palm of my hand. "Well... That happened. I don't know nor do I want to know what problems that's going to cause, but can we just find an inn for now?"

"You're not mad?" Rose asked meekly.

"No. More surprised and confused and less than I expected to be." An odd confession that came from my lips, but I felt it was true. "Look. I can't tell you what to do, but could you let us catch our breath before we start more trouble?"

From the crowd of people moving all around us an older woman's voice called out, "Rosette? That is you, isn't it, Rosette?" Her tone was stressed and generally unfriendly.

Rose immediately tensed up; her tail went rigid, and the look in her eyes said to me that she was debating on trying to slip away unseen, but when she turned her eyes toward the voice with me, we saw that a middle-aged, dark skinned, plump woman had already fixed her eyes on her. They were sullen and sunken eyes with bluish-black rings under them; she didn't look like someone who got a very good night's rest very often, which alone would explain the temperament.

"M-mat? Didn't think I'd-" Rose said, bumbling.

"That's Matilda to you. No one has heard where you've been in a year!" She yelled back.

Fierce and battle thirsty Rose seemed to be backing down, which was rare sight. The older woman walked, waddled, closer until she was right in Rose's face. She tried to back away, but the older woman just kept pressing forward.

"Don't tell me you've been just walking around shoving those

old papers in everyone's face."

"Well I-" Rose tried to cut in and defend herself.

"We've told you time and time again. One of the rules is to have current papers at all times. And what about your dues? What job are you doing now?"

The woman turned her attention to me at last. I grit my teeth on reflect, new thoughts of an old part-time job back home resurfaced back into my head. Along with it, the image of the scary manager of a local market and its iron lady manager. I think I begun to understand the latent power of this woman; she had the latent ability to invoke a terrifying and disappointed mother figure at will.

"And who are you supposed to be?"

"Laven." I responded immediately.

My instincts told me that there would only be trouble in making this woman wait for even a second longer. A response came flying out of my mouth before I could even think it through. Was it actually a good idea to just be throwing my name around? That kind of thought was put on the sidelines for now.

"Laven? Just Laven? It's bad manners to not give your whole name kid." She said, pointing her fat index finger into my chest.

There was a lot of pressure on my chest, not from her strength, but merely from her presence. She was just like that one aunt that terrified you as a kid, and the trauma of being left alone at her house for a day carried on as emotional scars late into your adult life. Like Rose I felt myself being pushed back onto my heels.

"That is quite enough."

A black blur stepped in front of me, and Susan moved in to put herself between myself and the woman. Matilda's eyes lit up like hellfire; a scowl on her face tore at Susan like a vicious beast. Susan didn't even budge; her face was calm and stoic as always and weathered the storm. The bulldog had been denied its bone, so it bared its teeth and growled.

"Young miss. Out of the way, I'll get to you soon-"

"If you insist on respect being due to the length of one's life, I suggest you change your tone at once. As such, I will not tolerate

your abuse of my lord any longer.”

And the standoff began. A battle between a wolf and a bullmastiff. I didn't think I'd ever see a human with a presence enough to stand up to a monster, but I was witnessing it. The tall, lean and divine beast against the middle-aged squat woman with a serious pudge and gut. A battle of wills and presence equal on both sides, until Rose recovered and slid back into the fray. She collided against Susan's shoulder and stuck out her index talon at Matilda.

“Hold it!” She yelled out.

Now Rose had done it, the crowds had stopped all around us in a circle and began to pay attention to our little sideshow. I could only shake my head in horror and mutter to myself, 'no, not again.' I seemed to be doomed to an eternity of trouble, and I thought we were just lucky to have not drawn attention beyond the gate yet, but you could kiss that goodbye. What was to come was no doubt going to get ugly.

“Rosette... Not now-” Matilda growled.

Two on one, maybe they'd win, but this drama had to end fast, so I thought. That said, I put my hands on the two girl's shoulders and pushed through to stick my head out from between them and talk directly to this woman.

“Can you just tell us what the problem is? We're drawing a crowd.”

Like an enchantment had been dispelled the other three were suddenly awoken to the forest of people and monsters with their eyes fixed on us. The tense pressure was quickly replaced with embarrassment.

“Rosette.” Matilda said more calmly than before. “You need to report to the guild. Now.”

“Can we do that tomorrow?” I asked. “We just got here after a tough journey-”

“No. Right. Now.” Matilda bluntly commanded.

She locked her sausage fingers on the wrists of Rose and Susan both and began walking away. Both their heels dug into the cobblestone street to no avail. They both looked back at me, but

neither seemed to be able to break that woman's ornery death grip. The attention we had gathered seemed to have dissolved some time ago, and the people milling about swallowed and absorbed the three of them. I tried to catch up, but I lost track of them completely. Now I was alone and lost in a sea of people in a strange town with no money, no food and no clue.

There was no knowing how long the two of them were going to be abducted. That Matilda lady seemed to be someone from the guild and had no fear in dealing with monsters. She had said Rose needed to report in, but also dragged Susan off as well. Maybe she thought she was a guild member as well? Susan's appearance didn't even phase the old woman. She's an anubis; that's not something people see, ever, or so I thought. When those two managed to escape her clutches, they'd probably find me pretty quick. Maybe they'd do it faster if I just went and found an inn. I did say we should find one.

There wasn't any need to panic. None at all. I was sure I'd be fine. This is the city after all. Not some wild and untamed wilderness with hungry beasts. Ruthless lustful beasts. This was civilization with the rule of law. No need to worry. None at all.

“Hey there, handsome.” A voice cooed from behind me.

No need to worry. Just some young sounding lady who probably could tell I looked lost. Just a helpful lady willing to lend a hand. That's a good thought to keep in mind, so I'll just keep that in mind as I turn around. As I turned around I spotted a tall and lithe woman wearing almost next to nothing. With sinister and demonic curled horns jutting from her head, leathery bat like wings protruding from her back and a long black tail with a devil's spade on the end of it. With her hands on her wide hips below waspish thin waist, she leaned over and looked up at me, a gesture mostly likely to avert my eyes a little lower at her barely covered cleavage.

“Good evening.” She said in a long prolonged drawl.

Her voice was heavy with flirtation, but I took it as a threat because this woman was a demon. By how provocative she was, she was a hallmark succubus. The dangerous embodiment of lust I've heard about. My hopes for an uneventful outing were dashed immediately. I felt there was a scent in the air coming from the succubus itself; it was sweet, almost intoxicating. It put me on my guard immediately.

“Come on now. No need to be so stiff.” She pouted.

Before I could speak another word, a young man came barreling from the crowd and angrily walked right up to the Succubus, without reservation or fear. Some other victim?

“Grandma! What do you think you're doing?”

Wait. Grandma? What?

The succubus turned to the man, still pouting, “Just having some fun. Don't be such a stick in the mud.”

The man didn't back down and kept shouting back, “Can't you think of your family, what effect do you think your actions have? None?”

“Just teasing the poor boy here. I wasn't going to even lay a hand on him. A girl just needs to know she still has it.”

The succubus wrapped her arms around her chest and held up her breasts and swiveled her torso back and forth to cause them to shake suggestively. I felt myself heat up a bit from the sight, but the guy didn't seem taken aback or affected at all.

“Oh!” She suddenly cried out. “I have to be going. Your grandfather is waiting; I said I wouldn't be gone long.”

The succubus lifted up a wicker basket, inside were... oysters. Lots of them. With a few beats from her wings, she lifted off the ground without effort and took off to the skies. She soared only just above the crowds of people in the street as she disappeared from our sight.

I was still in a daze when the man approached and started trying to explain himself... and her.

“I'm terribly sorry about that. She's not a bad person. You see, my grandmother only just changed a couple of years ago. She's been looking out for my grandfather; he's been getting old and frail you see. She was always so full of life, but even she was getting frail and old. When she started to ache and began losing her sight, she, well... She gave into a 'temptation' and thought that would solve all her problems.”

“Look-” I started saying, trying to get a word in.

“No no no, please. I understand. She's an embarrassment to

our family. You need not say anything. Allow me to extend our most sincere apologies. You must forgive her. She did it for good reasons. She's young again. My grandfather is happy his wife is so beautiful now too, and he's never felt... well...” The man was getting embarrassed. “...Younger?”

With the man flustered, I got in edgewise at last, “An Inn, just tell me where the nearest inn is, and I'll forget this ever happened.”

A look of relief replaced the man's embarrassed and surprised face. He let out a long sigh, happy that he wasn't going to have to do any further apologizing.

“Yes, of course, you look the traveling sort. Just head down this road; keep right for two forks into the road, and you'll get to the Greased Goose. Look for a simple sign with just a dirt road forking. Well, good evening then. Thank you and sorry.”

The man wave good-bye and in a rush started running off and cutting through the crowd off in the direction where the succubus had flown away.

Well, that happened too. I suppose life for everyone got complicated when monsters got involved. Not necessarily for the worse, but trouble all the same. At least I knew where to go now; the whole thing wasn't a wash.

I decided to leave quickly, lest trouble find me again, which it seemed to do more often whenever I was idle. The crowds walking down the street were much easier to navigate than they looked, and progress was faster than I thought. Sometimes I had to step out of the way of a tail, wing or something, but everyone was still very pleasant and relaxed. Although the crowds were thick, there wasn't any panic that made people cut each other off. Instead, everyone seemed very courteous. Maybe it was another product of being used to getting held down behind these walls?

I was so caught in my own train of thought that I didn't notice I had wandered out of the stream of the crowd to an area of the road which seemed to have been avoided by the current of people. It was so jarring to see a space of at least three meters between myself and the crowd carrying about their business as usual, but not as much as the pieces of wooden and broken stones embedded in the soft ground which had taken the place of the cobblestone.

“Look out below!” A man's voice called out from above.

I didn't even look up; I pushed off the ground and threw myself out of the way of a long two by four which hit the ground with a crack, then fell over sideways. My heart was beating quickly, my breathing became hard and my throat went dry. I looked up to see a balding older man hanging three stories up on an unfinished building looking down at me. From behind him a head poked out; it looked like a child but with two large horns jutting out from her head and long ears poking out below them. From all around the man another four children resembling the first also poked their heads out. They all wore the same mischievous expression; I could swear it hid a trace amount of disappointment to see I was still standing upright.

“You missed Tali!” One shouted out in a high pitch.

“Nice butter fingers!” A second called out.

“Stop trying to carry more than three at once, Tali!” The third yelled.

“Shaddap!” An unseen girl called out from behind them. “Dolly did it, not me!”

“Just go and clean it up.” Ordered the man. “We're ahead of schedule today. Keep it that way. And sorry by the way! You alright down there?”

I brushed off the dirt off my clothes and replied back, “Yeah. No worries. It didn't kill me.”

From the open doorway leading into the building one of the girls came rushing out. She couldn't be any taller than 130 centimeters and looked like a child. At least she would have, but those horns and ears told me another story. She continued rushing toward the large piece of wood and bent down to wrap her arms around it. Without paying any attention to me she lifted it above her head with ease and rested it on her shoulder.

“While you're down there, grab some of the others, Tali!” The man commanded.

“Yeah!” she said snidely.

I watched the girl pile up more of the lumber on her shoulder. She didn't slow down at all, and it seemed like it wasn't a bother to her at all. She stood back up with about eight two by fours resting on her

right shoulder, she could barely wrap her right arm around all of them to hold them there.

“Hey! Dolly!” Shouted the man above. Grab those stones will ya!”

“Yes~!” A new voice called out.

The voice sounded a little slurred and droll and from the house another 'child' emerged. Her appearance was a stark contrast to the others. She was as short, but one of her horns was much larger and longer than the other. She had a dazed and droopy expression with a smile plastered on her face that screamed 'simplicity'. Furthermore, her breasts were absurdly large for her size. Those didn't have any reason to be on a child. They were larger than her head, and they bounced comically against and together on her chest. When she approached a slab of stone that was as big as her and lifted it into the air above her head with both arms as though it was nothing, I had to admit that these were not children but just small monsters.

As the two of them went back into the house, the man up top called back down to me again, “Sorry about that! I'll buy you a drink later, if I see ya. Maybe. Have a nice night.”

With that curt apology for something that may have killed me, they all vanished from sight and probably went back to work. I guess I know why the people were avoiding this building now. It helped my theory that this city was pretty close knit. Without a sign or barrier, the people here knew full well to stay away for fear of falling debris. They seemed to be in construction or at least repair. With a mob of little monsters with strength for their size like that, I guess you would be ahead of schedule.

I wasn't going to wait around to be flattened or clobbered by more fall debris, some of which weighs more than I do, so like before I decided to quickly go on my way. The first fork was right ahead, so the inn had to be close by.

I followed the road and let myself be carried by the current of people and occasional monster until I finally came to the second fork and took another right. Hanging above the heads of the crowd in front of me was a hanging wooden sign of a goose running and flapping its wings. That had to be it. Well, except for a couple of possibly bad situations I was able to handle myself well enough. Those girls worry too much sometimes. It's not as if I'm completely-

“Laven” A female voice stated coldly right behind me.

Before I could turn around I felt something pointed press up against my back, even through my leather jerkin. A ringing in the back of my head, my instincts, told me it was steel and sharper than it felt. It wouldn't take too much effort to push through into my spine.

“Laven... Into the alley. Now.” She commanded.

We both stood in the middle of the street with people moving all around us. The boisterous white noise of the crowd, the talking and the footsteps against cobblestone rung in my head as my senses heightened to the danger I was in. No one seemed to notice the two of standing there, let alone the dagger nearly stuck in my back.

“Now.” The voice whispered threateningly.

I had no choice, I'd be stuck, maybe fatally with one or two pushes into my kidneys. I kept my hands rigid at my sides and after taking the first step and turning right into a nearby alley kept walking as the pointed steel against my lower back kept me walking. A few meters into the alley, past some crates and well enough out of sight from the crowd the dagger was released from my back. I took the cue and turned around. Standing before me was a small lithe figure. Wrapped in a green cloak with a hood covering the face, but the figure couldn't have been anything else other than a woman.

When she looked up at me, her face didn't seem particularly compelling, even if the features weren't nothing to sneeze at. This person wasn't a monster. That was what my intuition told me. She didn't have the same presence. I was surprised I was sensitive to these things. Brown eyes and black hair, cut in a conservative way, probably a pixie cut. While I was studying her, she was looking down at a piece of paper and looking back up at me. On that paper was a rough sketch of myself.

“Yeah. You match the description. And those clothes of yours, it has to be you.” She finally said.

“Am I under arrest or something? I'm a busy person.” I said boldly and annoyed.

“I'm going to be the one asking questions.” She snarled.

Her bark had bite, given that she flashed that dagger of hers just a few centimeters from my face.

“What are you doing in Vilmheim, Laven? And how did you get here? You're supposed to be near Brun. There's no way you'd get out of the frontier as fast as you did.”

“Maybe you should start with what the problem is?” I chided.

Once again, she flashed the dagger, but this time she pressed it lightly against my nose, just lightly enough as to not pierce the skin, but hard enough to pick up on the pain of the sharp edge.

“You caused a lot of trouble in Brun. What are you up to now?”

“Trouble? I was just passing through. Just like I'm passing through here now.”

“Hardly. I'll ask again. What are you after? You terrorist.”

Terrorist? What the fu- God dammit.

Chapter 27

I was starting to go a little cross-eyed because my eyes were glued to the long and sinister looking dagger being thrust in front of my face. I was, however, more depressed than terrified. Among the troubles I've had recently, this ranked rather low. Not that this was any less deadly a situation, but still... It was a depressing thing to be getting used to this. Once again, this world was driving home the alarming dichotomy that it either wanted me dead in the worst possible ways or fell madly in love with me... Sometimes both at the same time. This time it was some human woman, some kind of assassin, maybe just a thug or a spy if I was lucky.

Most of her face was concealed behind her hood and the scarf she had wrapped around half of her face, but she was definitely human, I could feel it. Monsters gave off a certain aura, a certain pressure that you picked up on instinct. Like being locked in a cage with a wild animal, even if that beast was tame and used to humans there was a primal fear in the back of your head that told you this creature could disembowel you if it seemed like a good idea at the time. That said, there was a very familiar antagonism, a very human malice; it was actually a little refreshing.

With her free arm, she grabbed my collar and pushed me back up against the wall, still pointing that dagger of hers into my face with her right. It wasn't a gentle push; it was rough but calculated. A controlled amount of strength meant to intimidate. I was wondering why I was so calm to be thinking these things through right now.

“I said: What are you after, Laven?” She growled.

I think I might have rolled my eyes unknowingly because with an irritated grunt she pulled me back and slammed me against the wall of the alley once again. I guess they don't teach patience in interrogation class. She didn't even give me five seconds to start talking.

“What do you hope to accomplish here?” I asked.

Maybe I should start thinking through what I'm going to say? I was getting a little annoyed now, and my choice of words was betraying how thin my own patience was getting.

“I'm asking the questions here.” She snapped back.

“Did it cross your mind to maybe observe me for a little and

guess I was minding my own business?"

"I said I'm asking the questions here. Start answering or-"

"Or what?" I said raising my voice.

I think that outburst of aggression put her off balance. I suppose it wasn't a smart thing to raise your voice and get angry with someone holding a blade within cutting distance of various arteries, veins and vital organs. The sheer audacity of the act wasn't something that she seemed to anticipate.

"Or what?" I repeated myself. "You're going to stab me? You should think that one through a little."

"I said be quiet." She barked while holding the cold steel edge to my throat.

"Yeah, yeah." I quipped. "You'd better make it a good one. If I get a chance to scream, that will draw some attention. After that, I hope you can carry my limp body out of here fast, or they'll find my body. Do I even need to mention I'm not here alone? Once those two find out what happened to me, what do you think is going to happen?"

"You're still threatening me?" She menaced with a snark grin.

"No. Not JUST you." I retorted with equal menace.

Then it was time for the moment of truth, would she back down? Would she slit my throat? Playing the part of the innocent traveler minding his own business didn't seem to fit into her narrative, so playing that card wasn't going to work. If someone has gone through all the trouble of making you the bad guy, you may as well use that against them put a little fear into them. Just like how it was with Zerin, and that worked out well... In the end... After all the pain... and dying... Maybe this was a bad idea after all.

Just as I thought my bluff might have been called, she withdrew and took a few steps back. She was still pointing the dagger my way, but it would at least take a lunge to cut me now. I strained myself to keep my cool and tugged at my clothes to unruffle them and roll out the wrinkles.

"Well then..." I said cheerfully. "I'll just go about my business then. I'm just grabbing a couple day's rest, some supplies, and we'll be

leaving after that.”

She didn't respond; she simply watched and observed me with suspicion. She wasn't even moving. Like a taught bow she was ready to fire any time. When you're ahead, it's a perfect time to possibly foul it all up by giving one more little push. Right?

“And before you do something like this again... You should clear it with your superiors first.”

It was just an assumption, a passing thought, but I saw her eyes widen, and she took another two steps backwards. Those eyes screamed, 'How did you know?' I knew better, but I had to ask myself, 'Am I good or what?' She pulled back so easily at the first sign of trouble, that could have been one of the reasons, so I thought and I thought correctly I did. She's gone rogue and under no one's orders. This little encounter was probably illegal and violated habeas corpus in more ways than one. If I was under arrest, there was no need to threaten me. I'm also confident leading me away would bring Rose and Susan down on her faster than she could carry me to the nearest place to lock me up. Now that I had used up my luck for the week, I decided that I had pushed it far enough and made my way back to the main drag.

“If you forget this happened, so will I,” was my parting comment as I emerged and disappeared back into the flow of people.

Now the people surrounding me would take notice as I doubled over and held myself up by pushing my hands against my knees. My heart was beating fast, and I was starved of oxygen. Playing calm and cool under pressure like that was way more draining than I thought. I was sweating quite a bit too. Someone actually walked over and asked if I was okay. I had to wave them off and make up the excuse that I had run here and just tired myself out. How uncool was that? I hope that girl didn't follow, or all this was for nothing.... Again.

While I was still catching my breath, I felt another grip wrap around my shoulder. I can't even catch a simple break, can I? I was slow to turn around, which was greeted by a quick, 'too slow!' and a solid punch to my left kidney. I tasted iron for a second and was knocked to the ground.

“Aw come on. I didn't even hit you that hard.” A chipper voice sang out behind me. “You okay, Laven?”

Now that was a familiar voice. The crowd surrounding us had

spread out and given us breadth; some looked on in surprise, and when I got back onto my feet, I saw Rose standing there with her claws on her hips looking disappointed. Behind her was Susan; her jaw stuck in shock, no doubt her mind rebooting and about to explode at Rose for such brazen violence. Now I was sweating, tired, panicked and hurting with a small chance for internal bleeding, but I was happy to see the two of them again.

"Sorry about leaving ya alone." She said, specifically apologizing for that and not the sucker punch. "It's all taken care of-"

"What was that about, you violent vagabond?" Susan yelled, finally stepping in. "How dare you lay your hands on the Pharaoh like that!"

"Huh~?" Rose said, turning around with a long drawn out and thuggish grunt. "I'm making sure my husband keeps his wits up. Not coddling him like you do."

"I do not 'coddle'. I am a guardian. Harming your protectee is abhorrent!" Susan said, not being intimidated nor backing down.

Right in the middle of the street, the two of them began arguing again. Luckily everyone seemed to ignore us and walk around, carrying about their own business. That helped mitigate the embarrassment a little.

"By the way, I found our inn." I said, stepping between the two of them.

Just before the next fork in the road, only about twenty meters away, was the Greased Goose; its wooden sign hanging above the heads of the crowd all around us. The sooner I had a chance to collapse and fall asleep and get these two to stop fighting and carry on, the better. I think the passive aggressive tone in my voice got through, and the two of them relented, albeit reluctantly this time, and the three of us filtered into the inn.

The day was almost done, and night had almost descended upon the city, so even this inn was bustling with people conversing and drinking merrily. The company seemed more amiable than the last tavern Rose and I had wandered into some time ago back near Brun. Probably because this establishment's patrons were laborers, artisans and merchants instead of kidnappers, thieves, arsonists and murderers. With the soft glowing hearth by the far wall, and its warmth, I felt at ease immediately.

The owner of the tavern, standing behind a counter and in front of a wall covered with shelves weighed down by numerous bottles and kegs, seemed like a pleasant man, even with his bald head and scared facial features. An old sword hanging behind him told me that he was probably some retired veteran who settled down to a quiet and quaint tavern after years of hard fighting. His ridiculous sized biceps were probably enough to keep the peace, but he had a disarming smile that betrayed all the scars on his body.

“Good evening.” He said with a raspy and rough voice. “How can I help the lot of you tonight?”

I thought being friendly would be something that didn't come easily to him, but I was proven wrong yet again.

“Accommodations for three.” I replied.

He kept one eye open and appraised myself along with Rose and Susan standing on either side of me for a few moments.

“Right. We accept monsters here all the same, and I don't charge more neither. I got a room for three for ya.”

One room for three? Ah crap... Not again. I was about to try to say something when Rose slammed down a few silver coins on the counter and flashed the owner a smile. Before I could make a move, a key was slammed down on the counter with an equal force, and Rose received a smile back as well. A couple of 'knowing' smiles. I turned to Susan who stood there with her arms crossed, but not saying or ready to protest anything. She noticed I was looking at her, but she merely looked away with a blush.

When I looked back, faster than my eyes could follow, Rose grabbed and pocketed the key to the room. She then whirled around and grabbed hold of arm.

“Alright! She bellowed. “It's time for a celebration. Adventure complete! Let's drink to good health for the next!”

Without a moment of rest, Rose pulled me to one of the open tables and plopped herself down on one of the benches. With her grip still wrapped tightly around my arm, she sat down suddenly; I was pulled down, and my bottom came into sudden contact with the bench as well. Susan had remained calm and sat herself on my opposite side. There was no escape now.

Rose tossed an arbitrary number of coins at a passing bar maid and ordered whatever she could bring right away. Drinking heavily seemed to be Rose's plan tonight. I was dreading being dragged into it, maybe Susan—who was still quiet and collected—would step in at some crucial point? While Rose was on a rampage, I thought I caught Susan throw me a few mean looking glances. Not just casual observations, she looked like she wanted to say something. When I caught her glance for a third time, she looked ready to say something when the gate to the inn swung open again, and a crew of people flowed into Greased Goose, one older looking man and a bunch of children.

At least I thought they were a bunch of little girls, but they were definitely those builders from earlier. They were the ones that almost crushed me by accident. They quickly saw I had noticed them; and following the lead of the man, they approached with friendly faces all-round.

"Yo! So we do meet." He said with a wide smile. "The name's Frank. Frank Guts."

He stuck one hand out for a handshake, which I took him up on immediately and regretted it with how rough like sandpaper his palms were, not to mention the crushing force behind his friendly handshake.

"Building is my game. These ladies are my crew."

They each waved at once, giggling.

"You know these guys?" Rose turned to ask me.

"Yeah." I replied. "Ran into them on the walk over here. While you were being dragged off to the guild."

"The guild!" Frank said while seating himself, uninvited. "You guys travelers then? Adventurers?"

"Yup!" Rose glowingly responded. "We're on our honeymoon."

Rose clung onto me and pulled me tight against herself. The gaggle of girls broke out in a scandalous squeal. All except the large chested one among them, Dolly. She had a big stupid grin on her face, and now I noticed she was hanging off Frank's arm burying her cheek into him.

While everyone was getting loose and relaxing I noticed Susan still had that dour look on her face. No one had even acknowledged her yet, and she seemed to simply blend in. I expected her to pipe up about the 'honeymoon' comment, but she didn't say a word. Instead, she kept her arms crossed and her eyes shut as if in meditation. I still caught her opening her eyes to steal a glance at me, but when she noticed I was paying attention this time, she turned away blushing and flustered.

The bar maid returned with a large platter of mugs overflowing with a bitter smelling yellow frothy liquid. An absurd amount of ale at that. Everyone all around jumped right into it. Emptying the mugs almost in one go. For their size, the girls—who I soon learned were goblins—could pack away all that ale impossibly quickly. Rose—who simply burnt away the alcohol—seemed unstoppable as well; she may as well have been drinking water. Except that the more she drank, the brighter and more fierce her tail blazed. Everyone was drinking, getting tipsy and having a good time, except for Susan; who didn't touch her drink at all, even when one of the more drunk goblin girls swiped her drink and downed it all with one swig.

“The Vilmheim reconstruction bureau gave us a big bonus for being two weeks ahead of schedule today, so don't worry about tonight!” Frank announced to the whole table, his voice with a hint of slur.

The celebration went on, for one hour then two. There didn't seem to be a stop to it. With Rose wrapping her arm around me and breathing heavily on me with hearty laughter smelling thick like alcohol, and Susan every so often pinching my pant legs with her claws I had no means of escape. With every toast, I chugged back my share, but I was nowhere near as intoxicated as the others were getting.

Celebrations continued uproariously until something dire emerged from the Greased Goose's entrance. The saloon doors of the tavern slammed open, and the near splintering of wood seized the attention of every patron. All conversations were silenced, and the music died. The disturber of the peace was an older woman wearing an apron with white disheveled hair and a sour disposition on her face; the last of which defined her more than any other feature. Her gaze focused on one man, poor old Frank. It was the kind of rampage only a married woman was capable of. Every married man present was sensitive to it, hence why they all thought the bang was meant for them.

All eyes turned to the scene while every mouth shut tight. Every man accessed the danger and mentally prepared themselves for the imminent hand ruthlessly clamping down on an ear and ruthlessly dragging them outside. This lady had all the trappings and appearance of that stereotypical homely and round middle-aged house wife; she was just missing a rolling pin, bathrobe and fuzzy slippers... That kind of scene didn't seem like such a farfetched cliché at the moment.... She had the right attitude for it because I felt the sting of her glare by proxy when it locked onto Frank. A sense of relief flooded from everywhere else in the room, but it offered me no comfort. I was about to be near the epicenter of a massive shakedown.

“Honey.” Frank slurred nervously. “What brings you-”

“Frank!” She hollered. “What time do you think it is?”

“Just celebrating with the-”

“Leave your, 'girls'-” She spat venom with that choice of words, “-at work!”

“Come on, honey. We got a bonus; we're celebrating here.”

“I'm cooking and cleaning and taking care of the kids, and you're here just having a good time, wasting our money! Just a few contracts you said. Pays good you said! We're not going to have enough saved up for a nice house on the coast if you keep wasting it like this!”

“Big mean lady! Don't bug Frank!” A child's voice piped up.

Sliding off the bench and storming up to the woman was Dolly. Her perpetual smile was gone, and she was looking very angry. The size difference was comical. She stood barely four feet tall, her chest wobbled, each as big as her head, her speech was simple and her eyes lacked any glint of intelligence. However, with the strength she had she could crack that woman in two. That put a real tension in the air. Did this woman know what she was getting into? Did this goblin, this hobgoblin, know she was just making things worse? If I hadn't seen her lift a stone block larger than herself over her head without the slightest effort I wouldn't be intimidated either.

The two of them stared at one another. The whole tavern went quiet, and the tension thickened. I feared a fight could break out any second. They'd likely shout at each other, but if it came to physical blows, it would end quickly. Very quickly. I stood up immediately trying

to be diplomatic, but as I did, the other goblins were already rallying around Dolly.

“This is business.” One shouted, moving to stand with Dolly.

“Yeah. We're talking business over drinks.” Said a second.

“We got to plan for the bakery down the road for the end of week.” A third chimed in.

Soon all seven of them had formed a semi circle facing the wife, forming a blockade. The woman was bewildered and overwhelmed. I don't know if she had never been so angry to actually storm in like this before, or if this was merely the first time these girls had decided to stand up to her. Silence returned, but the tension had been dissolved. There's no way this woman could stand up to them all. Even if she still thought they were just children instead of the monsters they were.

“Honey.” Frank said over the silence.

He reached into a pouch at his waist and fished out half its contents.

“Go give the little ones their allowance early. I'll be home in an hour.”

The woman was still upset, but a bribe was going to suffice. It had to. She turned around and left the tavern in a quiet fit. I suppose it was the dog house or the couch for Frank tonight, but when he turned back around he didn't seem too concerned.

“What's the matter! I got an hour left, and the night is young! George! Aaron! I see you two in the corner. Get over here. You're playing tonight, and I won't take 'no' for an answer!”

Frank poured the rest of the pouch, and a bunch of copper and silver coins clattered and rolled over the table top.

“As many rounds for everyone! And play you two bastards, play!”

The innkeeper smiled and nodded at the barmaid. She went into the back, and the innkeeper fished out a bottle from under the counter and cracked it open with a pop. The people all around started cheering as the barmaid returned with other staff hidden, previously working, in the back, rolling out kegs of ale. Standing on one of the

tables two other men in the corner of the inn each produced a pair of instruments that looked like a fiddle and a flute. With a few practice notes, the two of them started playing a high tempo tune.

The already boisterous crowd all got to their feet with mugs in hand, grabbed the closest partner they could. A group of others started clearing an open space in the middle of the tavern for a dance floor. A floor which was quickly covered with people of various stages of drunkenness dancing in pairs.

"Your highness-" Susan whispered tugging on my sleeve. "I wish to speak with you, now while-"

"Laven!" Rose interrupted pulling on my arm. "Come on, Laven. Dance! Dance!"

"Whoa whoa whoa! Rose wait-" I panicked trying to get Rose to calm down.

It didn't do any good; Rose had already gotten up from her seat and dragged me over to the dance floor. Susan was looking rather irate with a tinge of disappointment back at the table, but that didn't stop Rose. She dragged me onto the dance floor which opened up simply to get out of her way. Taking one of my hands forcefully and putting my other on her waist she started moving her feet. I was still a bit stunned and got pulled around, but I got myself together to stop myself from falling over onto my face or tripping up. Together, we began to chassé round and round the dance floor, eventually even to the beat of the song being played.

Various catcalls egged us on from the sidelines as an open space on the dance floor opened for just the two of us. Rose's talons on her feet clacked and clicked as she moved as did the steel toes on my boots. I didn't expect much from Rose, but she actually seemed to know what she was doing. She fought with more than one style and seemed to pick up on them quickly. Maybe she could just learn this sort of thing, the movements, just by observing. But to put it into practice...

She eventually broke her grip but only to break off into a short dance in front of me. Getting swept up into the flow of things, I found myself clapping along with the others as she moved her feet- claws in a flurry of steps, twirling round and round on the spot and around me. Embers from her tail were thrown in every direction. It was as if she was her own little pyrotechnic display. So alluring and so bright and beautiful, I couldn't look away. When she finally came to a stop, I

grabbed her hand- claw and lifted it above her head and had her twirl on the spot and all around. Leaning her over and catching her with a free hand as she nearly fell over. It was all much to the delight of the other patrons who clapped, stomped and applauded along.

As the first song came to an end, I was doubled over and breathing hard. I camouflaged my nearly passing out and collapsing with a bow that Rose was imitating as well, and she pulled me back upright when she straightened her back out.

“Again!” She commanded, looking excitedly.

“Wait...” I said, barely, still gasping for breath. “Just one song for a break. Please?”

“How about I take you up on that offer, pretty lady?” A man, a rather handsome young one at that, said as he slid in, seizing a chance.

Rose looked at the man who slid in between us and then back to me. She placed her left claw on the man's right shoulder and with a quick movement shoved him out-of-the-way, violently and without a care. The man went stumbling into the ring of people around the dance floor. With the momentum, he nearly knocked over a group of patrons like bowling pins. The man looked dazed and confused, but the patrons didn't seem angry as they put him back on his feet quickly and everyone shared a hearty laugh. Except for me, as Rose once again grabbed both my hands.

A different tune started playing as Rose leaned back and spun in circles, forcing me to spin around with her. The only thing keeping us from falling over was us pulling on each other. This time the dance floor filled back up with the people who all joined hands and started moving in a larger circle. I found my hand being grabbed by one of the goblins who looked up at me with a large grin. The circles broke up and remade themselves, big and large as the song went on. I wished it would end before I popped a lung or one of my feet fell off.

I wasn't going to get what I wanted for about another five songs, when the two musicians finally tired. I think even Rose herself was slowing down by the end. She was getting wobbly on her feet, even if the flame on her tail was burning bright. Just before I was about to die, Rose ordered me to carry her to the room, up a flight of stairs and down a hallway. I held her up as she leaned against me. I had to fish the key out from Rose's pockets and pouches until I managed to

get the door to our room open and let her fall backwards onto the bed. THE bed... Real funny, Innkeeper.

I think Rose actually fell asleep immediately, curling up into a ball on top of the bed. I dragged myself over to the window where a group of chairs around a low table were gathered. Dropping down onto one of the chairs, I almost passed out right away before I heard the sound of another chair rattling with someone sitting down. Seated in the chair to my right, back stiff and rigid as a board, was Susan. Her face was calm; her eyes closed, but she had the same feel around her that she did back in the tavern below.

“Pharaoh...” She said demurely. “We need to talk.”

“Y-yes, like you wanted to earlier. I don't know how long I have until-” I couldn't hold back a yawn. “Until I pass out, but go ahead.”

Susan cleared her throat, “First. What happened outside the inn?”

My lips twitched into a frown for just a moment. She noticed something was wrong, didn't she? I suppose she would. She's perceptive and not caught up in her own little world like Rose is. I thought about what to say; I had said it off-hand to that woman, but I did say to forget about it. Forgive me for not thinking she'll get the chance she got last time again. I also didn't want to start a witch hunt of our own in this city. We just needed to get going. I also had a pretty good idea what effect telling Susan I'm considered a terrorist would have on her mood. The last thing I need is her giving out sentences for 'treason' or something like that. Nothing came of it, I solved the problem and we should move on.

“Nothing. I ran into some people on the way, like Frank. I figured you two would be done soon, and I hadn't found an inn yet. That would be a failure on my part.”

Susan opened her eyes, and her sharp red iris burrowed into my skull and out the other side... I don't think she bought it.

“About the guild....” She said carrying on.

That was odd. Was she willingly looking over my lie? She must be. I felt the pangs of guilt over it, but I had my own word to keep, even with people like that cloaked woman.

“We solved the outstanding problems. Rose's proper

documentations are all in order. As well as her current 'non-active' status."

"Non-active?"

"This journey is not a recognized job. She is on, as they said, 'a vacation'. Her rank within this organization is high enough that she is still privy to the benefits it provides. There should no problem in the immediate future."

That was something I found odd. I was convinced her special status was a perfect storm for her being allowed to run amok because she made people a lot of money and with a certain reputation was helpful to those who didn't particularly like monsters... If she's on 'vacation' with her 'husband', doesn't that violate everything her membership hangs upon?

"Of course, they are overlooking how often she declared she was... Married." Susan shuddered a little at having to say it like that. "As they should!" She blurted out, dispelling her calm demeanor for a moment before giving a polite cough again and regaining her composure. "She can make all the assert all she desires; it is not a recognized marriage, even her guild agrees as much."

Susan stood up straight, walked over to my chair and knelt down in front of me. I was taken aback, but she then grabbed hold of my hands together in her paws. I wasn't able to stand up or back away now. She was staring up at me with eyes pleading that I listen.

"I care not what concubines or mistresses you desire. So long as you are safe, that is your choice to make. However, I will never accept just any woman to be your wife. As your guardian, from now till death and ever after... I must keep in mind your linage and only the most suitable wife to your reign will suffice."

"Shoshanah..."

"I will be the one to decide that position." She declared.

Which was rather bold of her. Not to mention a little domineering.

"That fire-lizard... I will never accept her. No matter how much she claims, no matter what she does or how long and often she does it. I won't accept her. She is no Queen, and I will never accept or bow down to her as one. If you deign her necessary as a bodyguard, a

knight, mistress or concubine, then so be it, but never a Queen."

"I think it's a little early to be talking about things like marriage. I still have to-"

"Locate your proper realm, correct? That which is not of this world."

Now I was definitely paying attention. I thought she had hinted she knew before, but I don't remember ever mentioning I wasn't from this world. Not once.

"How do you? I never told you about that."

"A simple matter of deduction. Within the tomb, when I first laid eyes upon you, I felt your presence. Your heart was light and familiar to one I felt long before. It 'was' the Pharaoh I was sworn to be guardian over. In the Sea of Reeds, when I met you again with the Pharaoh of old, I was confused, but it all made sense. You are of the Pharaoh. One and the same, but not of one world. There is no other explanation for how you crossed into the Sea of Reeds upon your death. That is a place only meant for Pharaohs and to arrive so close to him. There is no other way."

"I don't know about that kind of roundabout-"

Susan stood up suddenly with my hands still in her paws. She was leaning in, her eyes wide and wild. She was one misstep away from tripping and falling on top of me. That didn't concern her though; she was staring deep into my eyes. Her eyes commanded that I was not to look away. Behind her, her tail was wagging back and forth furiously.

"You also have knowledge. Knowledge about the world. I thought about the things you say; the things you claim. Those that I can verify, all of them true. You must come from another world. One like our own, yet different. I began to understand during the walk through the desert and through the green hills and forest of trees. I believe I understand completely. My wish is for you to tell me more. I want to see this world for myself. So please, rely on me, use me. I will definitely make sure you return home."

My heart was beating faster and faster. She was usually calmer than this, but she was basically gushing now. A torrent of words, thoughts and feelings were thrust upon me. She was still leaning in closer and closer all the time as well.

“Because your kingdom is not of this world. It is the other; and as your guardian, you must be presented your divine right.”

Wait. Hold on.

“Shoshanah, what are you-”

“The old kingdom, the one long forgotten, it is gone, but there will be a new one, and it awaits you back home. To you, this I swear.”

“No, really, hold on a-”

“As for your queen...” Susan started blushing now. “If no other candidate reveals herself... T-then... Then...”

Oh no. No no no no. Don't say it Susan. Don't-

“...Then I will fulfill that role!” Susan declared.

I was still tired and in a daze when I felt a soft pair of lips touch upon my own. Her paws pulled apart my hands and held them down against the seat of the chair, leaving me defenseless. A face right in front of my own. Long eyelashes tickled me, and her small cute nose brushed up against my own. It was a sweet and innocent kiss; there was no lust in it. She slowly leaned back; her heavy sweet breath lightly wafting up against me.

“Although... I doubt someone else will take that from me.”

Just as quickly as she had lost herself, she turned completely red. I think her mind had caught up to what the body had done. She let go of my hands and jumped back. Pressing down on her head with her paws, flattening her perky wolf like ears against the top of her head, she panicked and didn't say another word. Grabbing a blanket, she fled to the corner of the room and squatted down. She draped and started mumbling to herself, talking herself down from the abject confusion and panic she was now in.

Rose—who was still curled up on the bed—wasn't even bothered and hadn't even stirred. Her breathing had steadied out into a soft rhythm. I sat there, stunned, in the chair. How long? I don't know. It was dark with only moonlight shining through the window. At some point, even Susan in her delirious state had curled up and fallen asleep wrapped up in her blanket. It was only me who was still awake. I had a lot on my mind now. I think that was shots fired, a declaration of war,

and just a sign that there wasn't going to be any end to my troubles in the near future.

Chapter 28

Through the window of the room, the sound of songbirds rung and the orange glow of dawn shone. It roused me from my sleep spent uncomfortably. Huddled up in a chair, I let out a long and powerful yawn. My eyes were no longer heavy, at least not so much as they were last night, and my body was lighter. A blanket at some point was draped over me, and when I looked over the room I saw Rose sprawled out on the bed, still snoring, and Susan curled up with a blanket in the corner of the room on the floor. Another peaceful start to a no doubt merciless day.

My back and joints popped and cracked as I stood up from the chair, an odd mixture of pain and pleasure from relief and loosening of my tired body. It wasn't a good idea to sleep in the chair... I didn't think I would be the first to wake; I'm usually not, but I decided not to crawl into the bed. Rose was still there after all. I might suffer not just stiff joints but dislocated ones while she wrestled me her sleep. I was anxious while skirting around the bed itself, lest she lash out and drag me down. She seemed completely out of it though and not likely to do so, much to my relief. Susan was still in the corner; one of her ears and paws twitching occasionally as she laid there on the floor. I see even she dared not brave the bed.

I needed to get moving to get the stiffness out. Not that I was going for another walk; I learned my lesson there. Fool that girl once, shame on her, fool her twice… I doubt she'd fall for it again. Maybe a few times up and down the stairs would work? As I was forced to grab onto and lean on the handrail, and my legs moved like they were in casts, I realized maybe it wasn't going to work out so easily.

When I finally reached the bottom, my joints were at least three times more flexible because of it. At the bottom, I spotted the innkeeper wiping down the counter-top. It was as if he hadn't budged all night. His keen senses picked up on someone else in the tavern hall immediately, and he graced me with his fake professional smile. It looked really forced; it was not a face you would expect to see on someone who looks more like a bouncer than a bartender.

"Morning… Rough sleep?" He asked, with a wry grin on his face.

I gave him a reluctant nod in return and was about to be on my way when he beckoned me over instead. Since he had given us a discount the night before, and my impulse was to show good manners,

I decided to take him up on his offer, so I dropped down on the bar stool.

"This one is on me." He said in a raspy whisper.

He produced two shot glasses and a bottle of a clear liquid, unlabeled; he emptied his glass immediately and raised it to me. I suppose he wouldn't have swallowed it in one go if it wasn't a show of faith that it wasn't poisoned. He figured I had reason to not trust him. He's perceptive; I'll give him that. I followed suit and choked down my own, almost putting myself into a coughing fit. As a show of will and dignity, I grit my teeth, held my breath and let it sink down without spewing it back up. There was something of a kick to it, like the kick of a horse. I was left wondering if I had just swallowed anti-freeze instead.

The innkeeper laughed but didn't make a single snide comment. He poured another glass for each of us but didn't down his right away. I suppose to allow me to recover or go at my own pace. On the bright side, I was definitely wide awake now; fifty CCs of pure caffeine would have a hard time competing with this. There was about twenty seconds of awkward seconds of silence, and I was beginning to wonder why he called me over in the first place.

The uncomfortable silence eventually forced me to ask, "Um, did you want to talk or ask me about something?"

The innkeeper laughed again, "No, the moment you walked in it looked like 'you' had something you wanted off your chest."

"And that's what the alcohol is for? To loosen me up? A little respectable early morning drinking?"

The innkeepers face was serious as was his tone, "I mean no disrespect."

I waved my hands in denial and downed another shot, and the innkeeper followed.

"No. Not at all. You could say a friendly face has been rare the past week."

"A lot of scared people, Mr. Laven."

The innkeeper leaned in, and the way he drew out my name while he said it put me on guard at first, but his smile was still as disarming as ever.

“The world ain't what it used to be. Lot of scared people. People were just getting used to things, and then monsters start acting different, people start fighting each other again. Lot of scared people.”

“It's far too early in the morning to be cryptic.”

He laughed another hearty laugh and slapped me on my shoulder a few times, hard. If I had the drink in my hand, I would have spilled it for sure.

“You can call me Goose.” He said, muddled with his signature laugh.

“Odd name. Very original.”

The lack of creativity in his naming of the inn or naming himself was pretty sad.

“So is yours. I doubt yours is real too.”

This time I shot a glare at 'Goose', and it must have been a nasty one because even his smile died away for a second, and he leaned back.

“You got a mean pair of eyes on ya. Those are gonna get you in trouble... If they haven't already.”

I exhaled, a long sigh to empty my lungs and my head, in an effort to calm myself. Maybe I was too prickly for my own good—for good reasons mind you—but this Goose character was way too cryptic. For a moment, I thought he was baiting me, but I think he was just trying to steer this conversation somewhere.

“Alright.” I said, curt, frank and a little irritated. “How about you just cut the crap and get to the point?”

The same silence once more hung over us both. Goose's smile was gone, and he glared at me with incredulous eyes. He pushed himself away from the counter and took the bottle and glasses with him between the fingers in his other hand. Without a word, he plodded over to the door leading into the back and beckoned me to follow with a flick of his wrist. I looked around and noticed there still wasn't another soul stirring in the inn, but I decided to follow him. He was letting on that he knew something; something that he couldn't let anyone else hear.

In the rear room of the inn, there wasn't anything unexpected, some stoves and crates full of foodstuffs and barrels of ale everywhere. It was just a big storeroom and kitchen. Except, when he pushed one keg into the wall there was a metal panel along the inside of the wall. With it was an ominous keyhole in the middle. A quick turn of a key from his keyring tripped some mechanism. Gears and wheels ground and clanked, and a portion of the wall gave way. Behind a sliding wooden wall were stone stairs leading to a secret basement underneath the inn. I had come this far, so I followed Goose in.

The walk downward wasn't very far, about ten steps. It wasn't lit at all. The only light was from the barely morning lit storeroom behind us. Goose was so familiar with the path that he reached another wooden door that led into a secret room with ease, even without light. The room seemed to have already been well lit and illuminated by the time I took my last few steps down the stairs. It was welcomed because the little light from the storeroom above was cut off when the gears and wheels churned again to seal the secret panel.

The basement below the inn wasn't some cold bedrock cellar; it was far too small for that, maybe only the size of a single bed hotel room. There wasn't even anything stored here, just a table, some chairs and a large full body mirror. That mirror was the only thing weird about the whole place... Ignoring the whole secret room business that is.

“Have a seat, Mr. Laven” Goose politely offered me, pulling out one of the chairs.

I took the seat and sat down at the head of a rectangular table. On my right, Goose sat himself down close by.

“Sorry, but we'll have to wait a few minutes. This is an urgent but unplanned meeting I'm setting up. Playing things by ear. You understand?”

“Meeting with who?” I asked shifting uncomfortably in my chair, the damp and wet chair.

He leaned in—his smile gone once again—and in a whisper he asked, “Have you ever heard of Typhoon?”

I was getting tired of people expecting or hoping I knew anything that went on in this world. Since it was very likely he wasn't talking about a storm, I had to ask what he was talking about in a rather impatient and impertinent tone.

He placed his right fist in front of his left shoulder and chanted off a well practiced spiel, “Typhoon. Fighting for mutual and equal human and monster coexistence the world over.”

“I notice you didn't phrase it monster and man...”

That seemed like an important distinction to me, one I soon hoped to have verified.

“Yes. Exactly. We believe Vilmheim is the ideal. Not the demon realms that spot Vilmheim and many realms within the Empire and beyond. We see them as failed experiments, but we also wish to avoid the autocratic and tyrannical crack down on monster and human relations the Church does all the time.”

I waved my hands to signal that Goose should slow down, “Whoa there, slow down now.”

Goose didn't seem intent on slowing down. He was worked up now, “You know of the Church and their inquisition, hands on, do you not?”

I remembered Zerin for a moment and wished I hadn't.

“You could say that.” I said nervously, trying to keep my lip from twisting which showed my apprehension and trauma from having dealt with them last time.

I failed. Failed to stop ruining the mood, that is. Goose seemed to have picked up on my apprehension, which also seemed to answer his question. An awkward silence once again returned and polluted the air around us once more.

“You know, I was part of that Church once, one of those soldier types. Did a lot of monster hunting... and man hunting a couple decades back...”

Great, now the air wasn't just awkward, it was getting heavy and he didn't seem about ready to stop either. I figured I was in for a life story. He would waste some time before whoever else was going to show up, showed up.

“That was until I was in the woods near Kerterez. My group got jumped by wolves. Not just wolves. Werewolves. Fast women, very fierce. At the end, I was the only one left. Just managed to get away. That or there were just enough chasing us that every one of them got

the prey they wanted already."

Goose poured another shot glass full and slid it over to my side of the table. I caught it and held it with both hands and continued to stare at the table solemnly.

"Until I came across a grove. Full of little flying girls. Fairies you see. I was so bruised, beaten up, tired and maybe dying. They laughed and giggled, but they saw I was hurt. Now I was told a lot of bad things about monsters since I was a kid. Even if my eyes were wide with fright and hate, they didn't care." Goose's voice got a little more serious and sincere. "They healed me, no questions asked. They didn't even want anything in return. No sex, no nothing. Didn't even occur to them I might try to hurt 'em when I was better. They even handed me gold. You believe that? Gold! A lot of it. They said, 'Take this, and you don't have to be a bad man anymore'."

"And you didn't hurt them." I said, just to be polite and show I was listening.

"Yeah. Dropped my old name. Let em think I was dead or gone in that forest. Ran up to Vilmheim. Bought this inn, did all I could for monsters to make up for em. Like the discount I gave you and your gals. Wasn't long after I set up shop that I met Viper."

"Viper?"

"Viper ABD," said a disembodied female's voice.

That got me to perk up right away; it was unexpected to say the least. I didn't hear the door open up behind me, and there wasn't anywhere to hide in this room. After darting my eyes back and forth, I finally spotted where the voice was coming from, the mirror. The steely grey mirror was shimmering like a mirage until something came into focus, a woman. At least the image of a woman, it was like a television had been turned on. I knew immediately upon looking at her that this was another monster.

Viper—who I guessed was the one in the mirror—had curled and brown shoulder length hair, but that's the only feature that was normal. She had green snake-like eyes; a few brown, white, light green and gold circular patterned scales on her cheeks; long pointed elven ears drooping from each side of her head; long sharp fingernails, that might just be claws, and, most surprisingly, a snake's body from the hips down. She rested her human torso on a long, coiled snake body. A rattle waving back and forth gently, not enough to make a sound.

“Ssso thisss isss who you were so eager to have me met, Goossse? Thisss isss the one called Lavvven?”

“That is correct, Viper.” Goose replied

His voice had changed to a very respectable tone and manner of speech. I don't think it was an unsafe leap in logic and simple assumption to guess that this was some big hotshot in this so called, 'Typhoon'. Her face seemed to be perpetually frozen in a very cold and analyzing stare. No pleasantries to be had with this woman, she appeared to be about nothing but business.

I had to get one thing out before things got carried away again, “ABD?” I asked.

“Viper ABD isss not my real name.” She replied calmly. “It isss merely a code name.”

“Right... A very clever one. Rattlesnake. Snake lady. Viper. Very clever.”

Not even a comical retort or annoyed complaint about my attitude.

“Lavvven.” She calmly said instead. “I will be blunt; you are quite the myssstery.”

“I'm not so bad when you get to know me.”

Nothing. Seems I should stop trying to lighten the mood.

“Lavvven.” She ignored me and continued on with whatever she was getting to. “Typhhhoon needs your assssissstanccce.”

I was afraid of that. Not that it was unexpected; somewhere in the front of my head were a few brain cells claiming they had imagined it and therefore, 'called it'.

“You are a myssstery, an enigma. You sssuddenly appear from nowhere onto the ssscene, and make quite a ssscene you did. Even all the way in the north where you are. I heard of the rumorsss ssso far down to the coassst.”

The coast? This was quite the magic assisted long distance call then. That image seemed a little too real. I didn't think immediate communication was possible here. This could be some parlor trick or

recording.... Otherwise this is some kind of magical video call powered by smoke and mirrors.

This cold and commanding Viper was using a tone that was starting to get under my skin too, and I snapped back on reflex, “So you think because the Church is after me, that you can have some new strange bedfellow of convenience?”

“The Inquisssition has not put a warrant for your arressst... Or exxxecution. You are merely a perssson of interessst.”

“...Meaning?”

“You are wanted alivvve.”

“Well, that makes my day. I thought everyone just wanted me dead.”

“...For interrogation, no doubt.” Viper concluded.

Okay, now my chipper mood was soured. I sunk back into my chair; memories of being threatened with physical torture of the worst sort came flooding back to me. Following that was the other memories associated with that little scene, mainly the burning, the suffocating and the broken bones that followed shortly after. Just a little post traumatic stress. No big deal. Just seemed to be a little more pronounced when I started feeling vulnerable. Vulnerable without the girls here. At least they were just upstairs... My hand was starting to shake a little, and I swallowed back a drink to still my nerves.

“And there be some in Vilmheim who would want to see the Church and the Inquisition get their hands on you.” Goose finally said, breaking his silence. “We'd like to help make sure that doesn't happen, but we'd like some help in return.”

“Look.” I said interrupting Goose. “I'm not going to give you any sort of answer right now. Not without consulting my companions. Furthermore, I'm pretty sure my answer is going to be 'no' anyways.”

“You won't make it out of Old Vilmheim without us.” Goose said gravely. “A lot of people were surprised to learn you made it down here so quickly, avoiding a lot of people looking for you on the way.”

Viper swooped in like the bad cop, “Vvvilmheim has itsss own problemsss. The Church being one. It sees Vvvilmheim as a monssster friendly eyesssore. Ruled by a family they'd like to sssee

deposssed. The people and monstersss here would nevvver accccept that, so thhhey would havvve to ussse forccce."

And then Goose again with good cop, "The marks of invasion you've no doubt seen. There are many in Vilmheim that would welcome you here with open arms just to spite the Church, but there are those that would hand you over. If not because they're afraid of you, but because they'd love to have the Church owe them a favor and look the other way, even if just for a bit."

"So then there's enough people here that will just let me leave. No problem then." I said, getting a little annoyed at how heavy the 'friendly' words of warning were getting. "I'm not just going to sit here. I got a mission. I'm going home, and this place ain't it. I got no interest in whatever you're doing either. I'm not sticking around, and I'm pretty sure I can't help you anyways."

Viper and Goose both looked at one another and seemed to have a conversation with just their eyes for a few seconds. After a few nods between them they both turned their attention back to me.

"That is sad to hear." Goose said, his voice heavy and sad.

"It isss jussst sssomething we need from the Church headquartersss jussst east in Lithorain. A sssimple retrieval. Your abilitiesss and skillsss allowed you to appear in Vilmheim undetected... We wisssh for you to lend usss your aid."

"East doesn't sound south to me, Viper. South is where I'm heading. To the Free Ports. I got no time for detours. Also, I'm not a thief or ghost. I don't know what rumors you've heard about me but-"

Viper sighed, changed her tone and confessed "It isssn't you that we need to do it, Lavvven."

"Then-"

"Rosssette, the Thhhorn Knight, and that Black Wolf. It would be withhhin thhheir combined ability to retrievvve it."

"Then why don't you ask-?"

I felt my heart thump hard in my chest, as though my rapid heartbeat from nearly turning into a nervous wreck was forcefully ground to a halt. Like an invisible hand, neither hot nor cold, under my skin was closing my throat tight. My body tried to stand up from my

chair on its own, to escape, but my joints had locked up. My eyes went wide. What the fuck was happening?

“It isss a ssshame he would not cooperate willingly.” Viper sighed. “We very much need the artifact the Church hasss ssstolen from usss. We must have it back. At all cossstsss.”

“They won't give it back just because we or anyone else hand em the kid.” Goose said.

It seems I wasn't part of the conversation anymore.

“And we won't. We will have to asssk for his forgivenessss later. You sssimply need to hide him away in one of your sssafe housssesss. Tell the other two he wasss abducted by the Church while they ssslept. They'll come rushing to his ressscue. When they break in, we will help and follow. Withhh thossse two, it ssshouldn't be impossssible.”

“Smash and grab, huh?”

“Exxxactly. When we havvve that Ssshard of the Sssecond True Tear, we will return Lavvven to ttthem and let them be on tttheir way, none the wissser.”

“After you send someone up to wipe this little scene from his memory, right?”

“Yesss. Yesss of course Goossse. Again, I apologize you had to have it come to thisss. I know... This kind of mission isss difficult for one sssuch asss you.”

“Just a few drinks with a little magic Dusk Weed in the gin, mix it with some Dawn Weed from this other bottle and... presto! Could knock out a horse out for a day. He'll be fine tomorrow. Just send her up quickly. I'd feel bad having him stew and fester in his 'cell' longer than he has to.”

“Of courssse, Goossse.”

"I'd still like to know how he got to Vilmheim..." Goose said, sounding a little depressed.

"It doesss not matter. We had planned for hisss unwillingnesss to cooperate. I had heard he isss... rebelliousss and ssstubborn, to sssay the leassst."

What the fuck? Talking like I'm not even here... So, this was all a set up all along, huh? That's how it is. I was just set up like an idiot and now I'm expected to play the role of your pawn... I suppose I deserved it for falling hook line and sinker at the first sight of someone who looked like they wanted to help. But to rope Rose and Susan into this, send them into enemy territory on some wild goose chase and get them in over their heads... Not that they seem to care; they just want their prize and don't care what happens to those two girls. I won't stand for this. They'd go so far as trying to lock me in some cell and drug and brainwash me stupid. Not over my dead body. I'm beyond angry now. That tear or whatever it is, it could be the cure for cancer for all I care, I still wouldn't give a fuck. I was shaking now. Which was odd, I wasn't completely frozen like I should be.

Goose and Viper were still talking, now with Goose out of his chair, facing the mirror, going over all the minor details of the plan. I wasn't even paying attention anymore. I was mad. So very mad. My shaking eventually gave way to a couple of twitches. Before I knew it, I was scooting out of my chair, silently. I could barely breathe, but that was good too; it meant I could barely be heard breathing. I spotted the keyring on Goose's belt. There wasn't going to be any way out of here without that. The secret panel leading to the basement had already shut itself.

My body was getting looser and looser, and soon I could breathe and move normally again. A weapon. I needed a weapon. Still sitting on the table was the bottle of gin. That would do. There wasn't anything else, a chair or the table itself would be too heavy, too noisy. I quietly grabbed the bottle by the neck and turned it over, making it into a makeshift cudgel and crept behind Goose. Being mindful of my steps and remaining completely silent. I couldn't see Viper from the direction I was coming from, so she wouldn't see me coming either.

As I raised the bottle high and got ready to swing it down, I had gotten as far as stealth would get me. Viper shouted something out. As Goose turned around to look at the table where I was, I saw Viper pointing there as well. Seems she finally noticed I had moved. It was too late for Goose though. He hadn't turned around enough to see me behind him until it was far too late for him to put up a guard. I swung the bottle down hard on the top of his head. I bared my teeth and gave out an angry barbaric battlecry as I slammed it down on top of his head. Gin sprayed everywhere and shards of glass along with it; the bottle had broken completely in one strike, even the neck of the bottle. It shattered into pieces, cutting into my hand. Despite all that, the

sickening crack of the bottle on his head told me all about the severity of the hit.

Or so I thought. The force of the blow made a loud crack and crash and twinkling of glass; there was blood pouring from the top of his head, but Goose didn't fall. He reeled, but he didn't fall. His stories about his soldiering days probably weren't a lie either; I figured that out when his fist met with my jaw only a moment later. His big meaty and calloused fist cut my lip on impact, and the force of the swing sent me to the ground immediately.

“Goossse!” Viper yelled, in a very condemning manner.

“What?” He yelled back, angrily.

“I told you not to harm him or any of ttthem.”

I felt my vision getting wobbly.

“Little blighter hit me with a damn bottle! I'm bleedin' too!”

“I told you to make sure he was sssedated ssso it didn't have to come to ttthisss.”

“I did sedate him. More than enough for just one horse. More like five.”

A black outline was closing in around my vision. Voices were getting quieter, and my eyelids were feeling heavy.

“Well, obviousssly you didn't.”

“I damn well did.”

Viper raised her voice and this time commanded Goose, “No more excusesss. Get him to the sssafe houssse and carry on withhh the plan. Now.”

I passed out completely.

Chapter 29

A throbbing headache and the taste of iron in my mouth, a welcome and familiar start to yet another day. I think the number of times I have woken up after being knocked out is gradually catching up to the number of times I've drifted off to sleep on my own, and that's not an accomplishment I take pride in. With pain and bleeding accounted for, my checklist took me to see if I had also been tied up. Stirring from my slumber brought upon the sound of snagging rope and jingle of chains. That settled matters... Once again, I had been KO'd and captured. Next was remembering how, when and where the hell I was now.

"Good to see you up, Laven." A voice sounding distinctly like Goose spoke.

I hadn't even opened my eyes yet, but by the sound of it, there was more than just a mere distinct chance Goose stood over me. He drew the short straw and got the orders to watch over me. Hearing that voice kick-started my memory, and it all came flooding back to me, my anger along with it. The question of how had been solved. Next was...

"Don't move around too much." Goose continued, assuming I was listening. "You're just gonna hurt yourself. Viper said we'd get your head sorted out right soon. No need to remember any of this after all."

I decided it would be polite to let him know that I was paying attention.

"Eat shit." I spat.

Yeah. That will do.

I felt something heavy, rough and gritty rest itself on the top of my head. If I had to guess, I'd say it was a boot. With an annoyed grunt in the direction Goose's voice, I'd say it was his. It was large enough and had the force behind it to be his.

"Don't get cheeky with me kid. You think I'm not pissed about the bottle?"

I wasn't in the arguing mood, so I chose to stay quiet. That didn't seem to sit well with Goose who grunted his frustration and pushed my head away. My neck snapped back a bit, but since I didn't really have enough slack to even fall over. I had to settle with whiplash

instead of a face full of hardwood when the ropes and chains snagged.

"You're a pretty big baby to tie me up this much for just hitting you with a bottle." I taunted. Finally opening my eyes and looking at Goose standing over me I went a little further, "I am flattered though."

A big meaty hand came swooping down and grabbed me by my shirt collar and dragged me up into the air. I thought I was tied down rather thoroughly, but now that I had a better look, it was more of a mess of ropes and chains, more weight than anything. Despite that he forced me up to his eye level and glared at me, probably in an attempt to intimidate me. Maybe I was still delirious, maybe I had just become jaded, but I just stared back at him with dead uncaring eyes. When he didn't get the reaction he wanted, he simply let me drop back onto the floor with a thud. I didn't have the presence of mind or strength yet to break my fall, so I hit the ground hard on my shoulder. I felt the pain, but I still felt disconnected from it.

"Maybe yer just crazy." Goose grunted while letting his large frame drop back down onto his chair. "You might also be some sort of freak."

I sat myself up the best I could and glared back at Goose who looked down on me, and we remained that way for what felt more than just a couple of minutes. The silence seemed to be getting to Goose who started to fidget, bounce his knee up and down and twitch the corner of his mouth.

"I don't get why you turned Viper down. Typhoon just wants there to be peace. No more crusades, no more persecutions, no more demon invasions or corruptions. Just humans and monsters burying the hatchet."

"And how do you expect to do that?" I asked. "This tear thing?"

"So you didn't pass out right away? You are tougher than you look."

Goose reached for a bottle and began to pour himself a drink. He was preparing himself for some sort of lecture; I had known him for less than a day, and I had figured him out that much. He only told stories when drunk, but he was slow and deliberate about it. While he was distracted I looked around the room since my eyes had finally adjusted. If I needed to make a break for it. Yes, I know it's a fat

chance, a pipe dream, but I figured I could at least dream about it. It helped keep my spirits up. Besides, I didn't have much else to do other than roll around on the floor and collect dust.

I could barely see since there was hardly any light at all. A few beams of light through a window with shutters closed tight, a single lantern on a table near where Goose was sitting and that was about it. The room seemed vacant of anything else even though it was about eight by eight meters. A safe house made out of an abandoned building or at least an abandoned room. This certainly wasn't a place where someone lived or worked.

With my last few seconds, I looked down at the mess of ropes and chains tying me down. I couldn't make heads or tails of it; it was a disgusting chaotic monstrosity. Goose was either a believer in overkill or didn't believe in efficiency or finesse. A good deal of less chain and rope would have done the job just fine. I could barely move my arms, but I could rotate my wrists, move my fingers and make a fist. I wish I wasn't able to when I clenched my right hand and felt a stabbing pain. It felt real, very real. Being thrown around didn't hurt this much. I turned my wrist around and looked at my palm. It was stained red. Blood, the red stain was blood, and there was a lot of it. It was still fresh too. It wasn't pouring out of my hand, but it was oozing bit by bit. In the very center was a large shard of glass half stuck. It must have lodged itself deep in my palm when the bottle shattered after I struck Goose in the head.

The nerve of Goose to not even treat this wound. I take back everything nice I might have said about the bastard... Well, I suppose the gin might have disinfected it initially, but this was definitely going to get infected if left open. I watched the wound for a little longer and followed the droplets of blood trickle down my palm and splatter onto the floor. There were a few flecks of blood here and there and one small pool where I guess my hand rested while I lay unconscious. I don't think I've been here too long going by the size of it. The glass stuck in my hand must have prevented it from healing properly, but I clearly hadn't bled too much. With all that in mind, I could only conclude It couldn't have been long since Goose brought me here.

Light still shone through the window, and my wound was still fresh, but I noticed the best piece of news yet. The flecks of blood didn't just stop around me. I followed a few droplets on the hardwood leading to the other side of the room. Right to the door. A smile crept across my face. Goose may be a veteran, but it was certainly because of luck not because he was smart.

“You going to tell me what it actually is? You two only called it the 'artifact' while you thought I was out.” I asked with sincere curiosity.

“Oh ho.” Goose laughed in an exaggerated and mocking manner. “Why should I go about telling you what it is?”

“Because you're going to erase my memories of all this, and you have time to kill and only so much gin.”

Goose's face twisted, his face scrunching up.

“Yeah. Yeah I suppose you will anyhow...”

Stupid moron. At the worst I'll forget, at best, if Susan's conjecture is correct, when they try to wipe my mind, I'll just pretend it worked. After all, if I can survive divine retribution, magic cruise missiles and toxic magic roofies, maybe I'll get lucky here too.

“The tear, right, what Viper did tell me, it's a big blue gem... A... um....”

“Sapphire.”

“Yeah, that. A sapphire. Something like that. Only a part of it though. Maybe the size of a finger nail clipping.”

“And it's worth the wrath of The Thorn Knight, why?”

Goose slipped deep into thought, fishing through his memory, before saying, “Because it's crystallized demonic energy. A lot of it. Packed up real tight like. So much that it makes its own. Think of a waterfall with a river that'll never stop flowing. If a monster got her claws on it, she'd have more demonic energy than she'd know what to do with. So much, they say, that the current Demon Lord is the Demon Lord because she got a whole one. The First Tear they call it. Stuck right in her bosom, so they say... They also say if anyone lays eyes on her they'll lose their minds... Seduced! Lovestruck into undying devotion. Judging from just any old succubus, who ooze charm magic like a pig does stink, it makes sense that anyone seeing her would end up braindeader and hornier than, well, anything horny you can think of.”

“...And she fused with it...”

“Yeah. Fused. Like you said. Right smack in the middle of her chest. Probably connected straight to her heart,” Goose said, jamming a thumb into his chest.

“And even if it's only a fraction of one, Viper would want it so that... No, if she had it then...”

“She'd take things into her own claws. The Demon Lord and her cronies these days don't seem willing to go around as they did before.”

“And when they hand it over to her... Rose and Susan... And me...”

I had a very bad thought. A particularly frightening revelation. Seeing how this Viper treated those who refused to cooperate, I had my doubts the three of us would be free to go after all this. Power corrupts after all, and I would hate to see how she would treat those who disagree with her after she gets a power like that. I almost opened my mouth to talk to Goose about it, but I held myself back. He seemed to be the trusting sort of person. I doubt my paranoia was going to get me anywhere. It was more likely to set me back instead. Maybe with another boot to the head.

“And how is it you go around with something like holy water not burning you at all?” Goose asked.

I thought about if I should answer or not, or just make something up, but in the end, all I could say was, “...I don't know.”

“You don't know?” He parroted me.

I shrugged, or tried to, “Just born that way I guess?”

“That's what don't make any sense. If you don't burn, that's because you're missing something. And that makes people scared. Because if you don't got that you shouldn't be alive... And you bleed. So you gotta be alive...”

Goose didn't say anything interesting after that, but so long as he was boozing and talking, he wasn't putting that dirty boot of his anywhere near my face. Old war stories, old tavern stories, I was hearing them all now. At least, some of them, after a while his voice started to slur a bit. A professional guard Goose was not; he was big and looked tough like a soldier should, but it might have been years since he's actually had to do any actual soldiering. I was expecting him

to pass out eventually. All I was left with was the ropes cramping my everything and drivel into the other ear. My eyes darted to the flecks of blood on the floor every so often, and every so often I kept wondering where the hell those two were. I know you two didn't fall for it, so hurry up already. I'm probably no further than ten minutes from the tavern. Most likely, I was punched out, not drugged. There was no way I've have been out that long.

How long I had been out wasn't mattering as much as the hours went on and on. Even with the shutters closed tight I swear I could tell how much time had passed by how the light and shadows had crawled over the floor. There were times I was dreading that I might have to accept that those two girls had heard the news of my 'capture' and rushed off. They'd fall right into the trap, and I didn't think Viper had any plans afterward to let us go on our way. If I was her, I'd say the prince was just in another castle. Look at me, one meeting and a back stab, and I already think so low of her.

There wasn't any way to tell how long I had been tied up, but when the sunlight stopped shining through the shutters, I knew full well that nighttime had fallen. I felt sapped of all my strength, my focus was scattered and my eyelids grew heavy from weariness. Goose didn't look much better; he was barely awake, leaning back in his chair and perhaps sobering up after finishing up the last of his gin hours ago. We were definitely in the same boat because we both jumped to wakefulness in an instant when a knocking came from the door. Goose silently crept to the door, and a sound of iron scrapping against the wood floor reached my ears. Its source was a flanged mace; Goose had armed himself.

“I said I didn't want service.” Goose said to whomever was on the other side.

After a few seconds, the voice of a woman responded, “Just doing the rounds like Miss Katwater ordered, sir.”

I watched as the tension in Goose's shoulders released like all the air out of a balloon. He looked back at me with a warm smile, albeit a misplaced one. I don't think there was any malice behind it; I think he was just trying to tell me the wait was over. Pretty soon it would be time to rob me of the few memories I had, so I would be a bit more cooperative, confused and less likely to escape... I could do without a few of them actually, starting with this morning. But then I'd forget to knock this bastard's teeth down his throat, you stupid daft bastard.

Returning the mace to the ground and undoing a number of latches and locks, Goose proceeded to unlock the door and then threw it open. His patience must have dried up some time ago.

“You're late, what took her so-”

Twang. I heard a lot of taught strings slacken, one after the other in quick succession. These sounds were followed by and mixed with many thuds and cracks. I watched Goose's tall and wide back twitch and convulse several times while the sickening bone crunching sound echoed into the room. I watched the mountain of a man lose strength in his back and knees and buckle under his weight and crash to the floor backwards. Goose's clenched fists hit the ground beside him; his arms stretched out like an angel, and after a couple of seconds they slowly lost their grip, loosened and lay there motionless. Sticking out from his chest were about eight short metal rods with metal fins, the points and shafts buried to their tips in his chest.

It didn't dawn on me right away, but when I smelled blood, a strong scent that couldn't be anything but blood; there was the instinctual and primordial part of my brain which understood immediately. Even though my palm was still cut, and the scent of stagnant and coagulated blood and scab had become normalized, I could smell this fresh scent quite well. Although I was chained and held down, my body found room enough to shake and tremble. I had seen a lot of frightening things, brutal, sick and twisted things, but this was a new experience. Goose had been shot. Shot dead.

My eyes were wide, and my throat was parched. I was ready, willing but unable to flee, so I had to sit idly by as a wave of shadows floated into the room.

“And keep her quiet... If she screams-” A man's commanding voice appeared from the approaching shapes.

One of them was dragging a woman along with them, one dressed up in work clothes, a homely but charming tavern maid dress. I think I remembered spotting in her working in the inn yesterday. She spotted the fallen lump of muscle on the floor that was Goose... And she let out a hysterical scream. A scream that was quickly silenced by the slamming of a hilt to the back of her head, knocking her out; her body going limp.

“...Deal with her.” The voice concluded afterward. “Good work, lieutenant.”

With one arm free, the smaller figure gave a quick salute and grunt of acknowledgment. A grunt with a voice I somehow remember. Shouted out from a silhouette and getup that also looks familiar.

“And this would be the infamous Laven. I presume?” Asked the man who was no doubt the commanding officer.

As the man approached closer to the table, he was finally illuminated by the lantern light. A man with a green cloaked wrapped around his shoulders like a shawl. Underneath was a brown tunic over a chain mail cloak. His hair was black; his features mature but not yet sunken, his brown eyes lit up by the lantern's flame as he stared down at me, appraising me. He grabbed the chair where Goose had previously been seated. His subordinates—each of them wrapped in the green cloaks like the girl before—pressed their crossbow stirrups against the ground and began pulling the mechanisms back. They formed a semicircle taking up the entire width of the room. Standing behind the CO's left shoulder was the same girl from the alley yesterday. When I saw her, I finally came back to my senses, wiped away my fear and menaced... At least the best I could whilst tied up.

I wasn't expecting the reaction I provoked. Each of the cloaked figures raised their crossbows to their shoulders with fingers on the triggers. Their CO had to wave them to stand down.

“Calm down you idiots.” The man barked. “He can't do anything. Isn't that right, Mr. Laven?”

I didn't say a thing. I just turned my attention from the girl, the lieutenant, back to her commander.

“The name is Barcright. Major Barcright. I command the third ranger corps. These men and women here are under my command, and it is my mission to bring you into custody.”

“Church custody...” I growled.

“If it comes to that.” He said smirking. “I'm not like my peers. When I was given the mission to bring you in, I jumped at the opportunity. I don't think letting you run amok is good for Vilmheim.”

“I don't remember doing anything other than existing.”

“Bad news travels fast, Laven. If that is your real name. When someone tries to see a town fall to monsters... I wouldn't call that just existing. I'm sure that goes beyond what people need to do

just to survive in this world."

What the hell is he- Oh....Right, the bluff I threw out at Zerin. So he blabbed it all? I suppose that kind of show was going to come back and bite me.

"Now, this sort of thing happens sometimes. Some men degrade into incubi and try to do just that... But not for a decade. When it happens out of the blue, even in the boonies, well, some people are going to take notice."

Barcright reached for the bottle that Goose had drank throughout the day. When he noticed how light and dry it was, he put it back onto the table a little annoyed. That expression stayed on his face when he looked at me again with an expression more dire than before.

"Especially when the one doing it shakes off holy water like dirty laundry water. That news travels really fast. But I don't really care about all that. I don't know if you're some sort of demonic anarchist, but I do know the Church of the Almighty thinks that..."

"And you think by trading me in, you can buy a peace treaty out of your ceasefire?"

"Oh ho, so you know that much already? That saves me a lot of trouble. I'd like to know a few things though. The lady over there didn't seem to know anything other than this safe house here and the passwords. What I really wanted to know is, 'what is Typhoon up to?'"

"You're already sending me off to the worst fate I can imagine. You think I'm going to do anything else to make your life easy?"

"I can make your life far less easy before you go, Laven."

I've heard some threats in my life, and this one sounded heavy. It wasn't terrifying like Zerin's insane ramblings and unhinged ranting. It was cold, calculated and professional. This wasn't a bluff, threat or intimidation. This was a warning. I wasn't going to get anything out of being silent... But... I can't give in just yet. It had been all day, but there was still a chance. Even after things had gone up shit creek like this, my chances weren't zero. It was just the time window that had been cut short.

"They're after something..."

“What?”

“Something blue.”

“Quit stalling, Laven.”

Oh, shit. He is good.

“A sapphire.”

“I said quit stalling.”

“The Church has it right now.”

“What is it, Laven?” Barcright said raising his voice.

“A tear. Blue. Sapphire gem. Typhoon wants it.” I spat out quickly.

I was feeling the pressure this man was giving off now. Barcright leaned back in his chair and went deep into thought. The lieutenant, that bitch, whispered into his ear. That damn woman, I didn't say a thing about this to anyone. That was the exchange to not have Rose and Susan go on a preemptive protective rampage on her ass.

“I thought we had a deal.” I called out to the lieutenant.

That got both their attention, but the woman didn't even flinch.

“A deal, Freeda?” Barcright said, turning to look at the lieutenant.

Giving a salute, she sounded off, “Just the encounter with Laven last evening I already told you about. What I didn't tell you was that I assured Mr. Laven that I would not report or pursue him.”

“Oh ho?” Barcright chortled. “And you believed that, Laven? I think I might have overestimated you. You're pretty gullible. She was being covered by her squad who gave her the signal that your friends were in the vicinity, and it was unsafe to continue the mission. And speaking of your, 'friends', I take it they were sent to get this gem you talk about in exchange for your safety-”

I was out of it for a second. There wasn't any bluff. I wasn't even able to hold my own yesterday. She didn't back off because of some empty threat I managed to disguise. She wasn't acting alone

from the start. In the end, it was those two girls who had saved my ass. I was reeling from the revelation.

“Laven!” Barcright shouted.

His boot slammed into my shoulder and knocked me to the ground.

“They don't even know I'm being held hostage by Typhoon.” I screamed in return, tears ready to well up in my eyes. “They think the Church were the ones. You think they'd run all the way there instead of rescue me if they knew that?”

“The Pharaoh is correct.” A calm voice called from the doorway.

My eyes shot wide open. That voice can only belong to one person- monster. When I pulled myself back upright, standing at the doorway, slightly luminescent in the dark side of the room was the anubis, golden staff in hand... paw. Barcright wasn't nearly so calm, but he was somehow managing. His little plan seemed to have hit a snag, and if Susan was here, it was a pretty large snag. Not unexpected though.

“She isn't supposed to be- How did she get past the- Men. Subdue her!” Barcright commanded.

The major and the lieutenant watched as confusion as the rangers in the room did not turn around on command. I was at a loss to why for a few seconds. The room was dark, but since I was on the ground I noticed the black billowing miasma crawling over the floor. It was licking and pulling at the legs of the rangers in the semicircle formation, and they were paralyzed. Their faces were mostly obscured by their cloak hoods, scarves and shawls, but I could see their wide eyes expressions now that I bothered to look at them. Susan tapped the bottom of her staff against the floor; a jingle and clinking of the chains from her scales and the sound of gold on wood released some sort of spell. The rangers all at once collapsed onto the floor as though a bunch of strings holding them up were suddenly cut. Unmuffled all at once, they let out a collective groan and moan of pain and discomfort. None of them seemed able to stand at all; each of them effectively neutralized by paralysis.

“I was uncertain if I would be allotted the necessary time to perform the ritual for so many at once before I was required to act. However, I noticed the Pharaoh had decided to prevaricate, rather

successfully, so I seized the opportunity.” Susan calmly dictated.

With a slow swishing gesture of her staff an invisible force slammed into the Major with an audible crack like a thunderclap. A wall of force surged forth from the ether and swept the major off his feet. A glittering shimmer remained where he once stood while the man went flying backwards into the far wall of the room. He let out a croak as the force of the blast slammed into his sternum and winded him, leaving the soldier to fall forward onto his hands and knees in a coughing fit.

Susan growled at the man sprawled on the floor, “For laying your filthy boot on, Laven. Know your place, dog of Vilmheim.”

Lieutenant Freeda watched in horror as her CO had been thrown away like a rag doll, but her anger and her training had her drawing her dagger and lunging at Susan immediately. Her movements were so swift that I was struck with the terrible realization that she'd close the distance with Susan in a moment and be in striking range. However, Susan had anticipated that. Her eyes glowed red along with her dual white exclamation point tattoos, both of them lighting the far side of the room with an eerie glow. Freeda's charge came to a stumble, her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor at Susan's feet.

“Ahhhh~!” She screamed, and it was not a typical scream.

That scream was one of ecstasy. That red glow, it was familiar... The Curse of the Mummy. Making the whole body extremely sensitive to stimuli. Particularly to touch, but even more so to pleasure. Susan had said it was meant to tie the body to the spirit by force. Here it looked more like the feeling of clothes on skin, a slight breeze or anything really was triggering an extreme overdose of dopamine. And the girl's face—her disheveled hood and mask had come undone—was that of a young woman, a regular woman, not a monster. It brought a sense of reality back to her. Average people in this world, human beings, human women, they lacked the almost unreal and supernatural features and forms of idealized beauty. They reminded me of home. Now that I took the time to think about it, this wasn't just some hardened soldier; she was a human being first, a woman second, a soldier third and a backstabbing bitch who made a fool out of me fourth.

“Do not presume I have overlooked your insubordination. I realize now, the worried and preoccupied face on my Pharaoh... It was because of you. He showed you mercy; it tortured him, but he bore

with it. For your sake. An enemy's."

As Susan was lecturing the fallen lieutenant. Freeda was too busy writhing on the floor to actually be listening, but that didn't seem to concern the anubis. Her face was flushing red; and as time went on, I thought I was watching the glisten and life in her eyes drain and turn a duller color. She eventually had stopped convulsing as if she had lost all her strength and had started to merely twitch, but she still did so violently and uncontrollably. I watched as her back arced painfully every so often as well. Susan did not lift a paw. She merely watched with cold and calm indifference in her glowing red eyes.

"To betray the Pharaoh's Kindness. I believe it will be you who suffers the first and worst punishment."

Freeda couldn't put up any defense or even beg for mercy. If she had any words, they were overrode by pants and moans that she couldn't hold back. All the while convulsing on the floor. It was like, well, like a series of orgasms one after the other. The more I watched, the more my throat felt parched; and along with the lewd sight and sounds, I was shamefully stirring a little down below.

"For your crimes... I sentence you, Freeda... To break." Susan's calm voice gave way to a frightening maliciousness.

Susan's marking and eyes turned an even more virulent and deeper shade of red. I think I could hear the magic in the air, buzzing and popping like static against my ear drums. Although this power was washing over the room, and even the unconscious and paralyzed rangers were slightly convulsing like Freeda was before, no one was feeling its effects like her. Her back was arched like a bridge; all her weight rested on the back of her head and her feet, and she was convulsing even more than before. I could see the whites of her eyes roll into the back of her head, her tongue jutted out of her mouth slovenly and her strained screaming in something that was like pain and pleasure mixed together.

I could barely watch, but it was so frightening morbid and, ultimately, lewd, that I couldn't look away. She was breaking all right. Her mind was breaking. If this went on any further, it might get fried completely, and her eyes were starting to look full and dead like- one of the mummies. Curse of the Mummy. No. That's not- Women turning into monsters. Susan was going to keep going until- she died and would be cursed to undeath as a mummy.

“Shoshanah!” I cried. “That's enough!”

Like a circuit breaker had been tripped, the red light in Susan's irises and body turned off all at once. The convulsing body of the rangers on the floor and Freeda all came to a stop. Each of them falling back flat onto the floor, panting, heaving, groaning and moaning. Freeda was still breathing. From what I could see, her eyes were still bland and dull, her tongue was hanging out and she was drooling, panting heavily, but she was still alive.

“Twice you have received the kindness and mercy from the Pharaoh. I suggest you do not take it lightly this time. For his wellbeing, I shan't listen to that order if you are found guilty again.”

After spitting out her warning, Susan stepped over the bodies splayed all over the floor to where I was tied down, and she knelt down.

“Laven, my Pharaoh. Please accept my apologies. I had failed to anticipate this turn of events. You have suffered this humiliation and brazen assault against your majesty. Please, I ask for your mercy.”

“Just untie me and help me up, Susan. Stop being so melodramatic.”

With a short grunt of acknowledgement, she unsheathed a ceremonial gold blade from nothing. Several gold spheres of light materialized in the palm of her palm and took physical form. It sliced through all the ropes, slowly, carefully. At least someone took these things seriously. I still remember the last time I was cut from ropes like these...

The mess of ropes I could not break free of fell off easily enough when Susan deftly cut through it like the Gordian Knot. Severed in just the right places it all fell apart, even the chains slackened and slipped off. After being tied up all day, I immediately rolled my shoulders and stretched as soon as I could to a series of pops and cracks as my joints realigned. Susan reached down with her paw which I grabbed and brought myself up as she pulled me to my feet. I was still a little too stiff and uneasy so I almost fell forward. Susan struggled to catch me but held up my weight. There was a moment where I nearly embraced her as my hands reached out to find something to break or stop my fall. I felt her warmth for just a moment, and I swear I saw her blush heavily before she pushed me back on

reflex. Perhaps out of embarrassment. I think she was going to say something when a green flash lit up the room.

Rising to his feet was Barcright, and he had just thrown something into the middle of the room near our feet. It was some sort of short stick, and it glowed a brilliant light green and like some sort of chemlight, but I suppose it was probably magic, alchemy or something else. That made me worried. It seemed harmless, just a light, but it was Barcright's laugh that concerned me. It wasn't a deranged laugh of a desperate man, just a knowing laugh. A calculated one that was for show but not exactly forced.

"How very touching. I suppose I was correct before. I should not underestimate you, Laven. You seem to have some very interesting and frightening allies... But so do I. Did you forget that I command the Third Ranger Corps of Vilmheim? One of the most decorated fighting divisions and special forces within these borders? Surely you have not. This building is surrounded by such men and women, veterans of many wars against the crusades and monster incursions into our lands, so I suggest you both surrender."

There was a moment of silence. An awkward silence. It felt like it was dragging on forever, even though it couldn't have been more than ten seconds or so. Still, I felt compelled to ask something.

"One question." I said.

Something had just crossed my mind. A very important question I should have asked earlier.

"This is not-" Barcright began.

"Not you." I said rudely cutting him off and turned to Susan. "Shoshanah, where is Rose?"

She smirked and said only one word, "Preoccupied."

A mighty crash broke the silence. Wood and glass splintered, crackled, snapped and crinkled. Behind the major, the shutter and window which had been sealed since the beginning of this long day was broken open. A sound proofed seal was broken, and the sound of yelling, battle, screaming, breaking and steel on steel flooded into the room from the outside.

Hurtling into the room following the explosion was a body; the very body which had shattered the window and crashed through the

shutter. It was a man cloaked in green and armored in chain mail. He hit the floor hard and then kept rolling until he came to a stop. On the hem of the man's pant leg was a burning ember of fire, wisping back and forth. He was still conscious, barely, and was surprisingly well enough to drag himself toward Barcright, grab onto the major's leg and pull himself up enough to look up at his commander.

“S-sir. It's an ambush. Run.” Was all the ranger could say.

The wall behind Barcright suddenly lit up. One straight line of orange streaked and glowed. After that, another and another in rapid succession, faster and faster until the wall was overwhelmed and, in a fiery inferno, exploded into flames. Shards of wood blew inwards like a breaching charge had been detonated on the other side. Striding into the room with her sword resting on her shoulder, a sword still burning white hot, was Rose. Her tail was burning bright, so very bright. It was a veritable inferno, almost as big as I have ever seen it. She had black stains all over her like wet smeared charcoal mixed with splatters of blood, none of which was her own. With that confident swagger, she walked through the hole she had cut... more like blown open.

“You were right, Hannah. That was more fun.” Rose said with that incorrigible grin on her face.

“My name is not Hannah.” Susan retorted.

She seemed more relieved than angry though, I suppose it might just the circumstances and the mood.

“N-no, the Thorn Knight...” Barcright stuttered, backing up as Rose strolled into the not-so-safe house which was now catching fire. “You're not supposed to be here. They said you already left this afternoon.”

Rose's attention turned to the major, “Oh! I remember you.” Rose shouted as she pointed at the man. “Lieutenant Bark Light.”

“Major Barcright, Rose.” Susan said correcting him. “This is the man who ordered Laven to be captured.

Rose's amiable face, likely so because of the fun outside, turned sour. Barcright cowered on reflex. I'm sure this was the one encounter that he wished to avoid. That was what his face said. Especially now that Rose's cheerful, innocent, mischievous expression turned serious and dire. Her light steps turned plodding and menacing as she diverted from her course toward me to Barcright instead. The closer she got the more he backed up, even though she was at least a

head shorter. He kept going until his back hit the right wall of the room.

“R-rosette. Look here. You know what will happen if you raise your hand against me. I can see to it that the guild-”

“Raaawr!” Rose yelled.

She lunged and raised her claws like a predator at the major who screamed and cowered, guarding his head with his arms and even lifting one knee up to make himself as small as possible. Rose didn't even do anything; she merely growled at him and feigned a rather comical attack which someone would do if they wanted to mimic a ferocious lion or tiger while playing pretend with a child. Rose laughed heartily and slapped the Major on the shoulder. It was so surreal, that the major pulled out from his guard, even laughed nervously along with her long enough to receive the full force of all Rose's strength and weight behind a haymaker to his jaw. I heard the crack, I saw the teeth fly and I watched the man's body hit the floor, hard. I couldn't help but wince while watching it.

“I think we're done here.” Rose said whilst cracking and realigning the knuckles of her right claw.

“Verily.” Susan said. “I believe we have overstayed our welcome in Vilmheim. We need to leave. Immediately.”

“Please tell me you've got that covered.” I said, almost begging.

“Of course.” Rose said smiling. “We got some help for that. It's how I got back in with no one the smarter for it too.”

“None the wiser—forget it. Not forever we do not.” Susan chided. “The Third Corps is just one group serving masters who will just attempt to bring about this incident again. The others who wish to be uninvolved or sympathetic to us will look the other way only for so long.”

“So you're saying we're on our own to get out of the city, and it needs to happen in a hurry?”

“Relax, husband!” Rose said strolling over and wrapping her arm around my shoulder and pressing herself close to me. “But let's get out of here first.”

“Indeed.” Susan nodded. “As the lizard had said, we have

arranged for someone to help us hide for now and assist our escape."

Without any time for further words, the three of us emerged from the now burning half wreck of the safe house, a lonesome warehouse near the city wall. It was early evening, but the commotion and fire was drawing attention and an apprehensive crowd. Soon the authorities and fire control would arrive, so the three of us quickly skulked off into the alleys and shadows. Where we were going, I didn't know, but somehow these girls had come through. They weren't even fighting... as much. I'd have to hear what happened later.

Chapter 30

“So that's when I said to her, 'maybe I oughta?' Heh? Hey! Hilarious right?” The little girl sitting right next to me on the couch latched and pulling on my arm squealed.

Sitting on my left and right, behind and around me, were similar and familiar faces, short little girls with little horns on their heads and elven like ears. To say I was uncomfortable was an understatement. They looked like children, but they had dirty mouths like an inner city blue collar worker. Maybe they were just short, but that's still not what my gut was telling me. Their mischievous devil may care attitude certainly made it convincing they were still kids, but I was assured they were more than capable and responsible enough when it was needed of them. Still, that didn't make the situation any less awkward while waiting around like this.

“What do the big sises see in you?” Said another of the girls who had crawled up over the back of the couch and plopped herself down on my lap.

I frowned and tried to bear the mob that was crowding all around me, but when the one sat herself down on my lap and while steadying herself put her little hand on my thigh, and her thumb went over the inside...

“Oh~? Is that why?” She said with a wicked grin on her face.

The other girls gave out a scandalous squeal and erupted into a maelstrom of giggling.

“That's enough you cheeky little-” Rose yelled, ready to leap from her chair and bull rush right at us from the other side of a low coffee table.

“Ahem!” Susan coughed, seated in another chair on Rose's left.

Rose halted half out of the chair with her claws gripped on the arms. The wood finish creaked, and the chair's arms were on the verge of cracking under her grip. Rose's eyes were fiery, full of anger. Meanwhile, Susan's eyes were shut as she sat perfectly still with her arms crossed. Despite her attempts to appear calm with her eyes and indifferent to her surroundings, I noticed her ears twitching and rotating, following every little sound and picking up on every errant little comment the goblins made.

“Yeah! That's right. You just sit down like Frank said.” One of the other girls taunted.

“Frank said we could play with big bro until he got back.” Said another.

“You think he's gonna help you lot if you go causing trouble?” Said a third.

“We got work we could be doing. Not helping you out.” Threatened the fourth.

“We only get half pay today because of you.” Complained a fifth.

“So you let us have our fun. Capisce?” Said the goblin sitting on my lap

Rose sat herself back down albeit reluctantly and visibly shaking with barely contained rage. I almost wish she would dare do something, but Susan was right. It would be bad manners, and Frank, the construction foreman, and his goblin crew was sticking his neck out for the lot of us.

It was late afternoon, and more than half a day had passed from the daring rescue and escape from both Typhoon and the Vilmheim authorities. I had already heard all about how Rose and Susan managed to pull of the caper that they did. I had to say I was impressed. More impressed the two of them somehow managed to work together actually.

The two of them didn't wake up yesterday morning until about thirty minutes after I had been dragged unconscious from the inn. Apparently one of the tavern maids came barging in tearful and screaming. I had been kidnapped, and Goose, feeling responsible for all his guests, went out looking. A likely excuse, but they did confess they were part of Typhoon, so Susan told me. The story was that I had been taken by the Church in the night. They even had badges, real badges so Rose claimed when she saw them. Painfully obvious evidence to plant on the scene. It seemed that Susan was already suspicious then.

I can see why; for one, the Church's crusades hit this place just over a year ago. Of course, fallen soldiers would have insignias to litter around especially if they lost, and lost badly, which was likely because the city did not fall. Rose was ready to go on the warpath when she

heard the Church was involved. Only one maid was left to inform them and give the well-practiced spiel that Goose and Viper had given her beforehand. One maid that Susan cursed, paralyzed and neutralized shortly after. Rose had been livid at first, but Susan actually managed to calm her down. Just how did they expect both of them to believe the Church sneaked me out from under their noses?

Once Rose had been calmed down, the two of them did a number on the whole inn. They did everything short of ransack it. The two of them scared away the other customers who were, in turn, grabbed by the guards who thought they were trying to flee the scene of a bar brawl. Susan boasted with pride that she actually managed to find the secret cellar before they had to slink away to avoid the guards rushing the place. Claiming she knew all about traps, secret passages and the like, she went so far as to say that elaborate set up was child's play. Even though the place had been cleaned and swept of every drop of blood or sign of conflict, it was Rose who somehow smelled something wrong. Her battle mania, for reasons unknown to me and Susan, could tell a fight had happened. When she went on the hunt like a blood hound, she found just that. The blood from my palm.

I had been carried out of the inn, the mess had been cleaned up but my clenched fist still had glass stuck inside my palm. By the time I was being carried out and away to the safe-house, I must have had my hand jostled loose, so the blood oozed out and made a very faint but very traceable trail of bread crumbs. When they asked around outside, they came across a succubus and an old man walking in the early morning which started as a late night walk. Why a man in his seventies was out that late for a walk I don't know. When they described me, the devil-woman recalled me immediately and recognized it was me being carried away by a man whose description couldn't have been anyone other than Goose. Their suspicions were thus verified.

I don't believe all things happen for a reason. That would be silly, but helpful coincidences do happen I guess.

They almost rushed in to bust heads, but Susan's intuition picked up on my reluctance to tell her about the run in with the Rangers. She sensed something was wrong. They knew it was Typhoon behind the kidnapping, but she felt someone else was after me too, and it wouldn't be safe to move until they showed themselves. 'Then they'd be watching us right now?' Rose asked. Susan couldn't argue with that; Rose was right. Still, they had to find me, make Typhoon think their plan was still going smoothly and draw out the third

party watching from the shadows.

So Rose, the highest profile player in the game, decided to pretend to leave. She'd no longer be a threat, and the Ranger's would move. Rose walked right out the city gates, only to sneak in unseen later. Susan tracked down the safe-house after losing the pursuers, most of them worried just about the famous salamander. After the Rangers struck, she emerged, and Rose waited in ambush. But how did Rose manage to sneak back in? It became easy once they both had the bright idea to get some help from a few new friends...

“Say that to my face and not in here and see what happens, runt!” Rose said fuming while looking down at three of the goblins standing opposite of her with their arms on their hips, grinning.

“Make us.” All three said at once.

“We'll clock ya good.” Said the right one.

“You ain't got nothing!” Said the middle one.

“More like Corn Knight.” Said the left one.

“Yeah. Corny lines.” The right one added.

“Uninspired.” Said the left.

“Lame~” The middle sighed.

They all giggled at once which only infuriated Rose further. Her tail went rigid and stuck out like a flaming meter stick, the ridge burning bright and furious. I was a little afraid for the furniture actually. It was Susan, again, who had to cough loudly, reminding Rose to mind her manners.

“Really now, Rose. You should not allow such crass, unsophisticated and juvenile attempts to make you angry stoop to their infantile games.”

“Hey. Hey!” Called one goblin cresting over the right arm rest of Susan's chair.

“Big sis~” Smarmed another on her left.

Susan started talking louder over the two goblins, “All that is required is to ignore them, and they will eventually...”

“How was he, really?”

I could see Susan's brow furrow, and her lips previously frozen in a straight line crook into a frown. Her ears twitched, her nostrils flared and I think I could see her eye twitch underneath her eyelids.

“That's not a nice thing to say, Tali.”

“You're right. An uptight girl like her wouldn't have anything to compare it to.”

“Laven~” the one on the left called out to me, “Who was better of the two? Was it her?” She said pointing to Susan; her index finger hovering, shaking annoyingly just millimeters from Susan's cheek.

The one called Tali just had to ask, “Is she as tight as she is uptight?”

“AHHHHH!” Susan screamed with a furious blush on her face and a pair of lungs bursting, unable to swallow down her anger anymore.

Susan flung her elbows out at the girls and tried to claw at them with her paws, but the girls easily ducked and ran away giggling. Like a dog after a rabbit she flung herself off the chair and gave chase. Rose without a voice of reason also gave chase to the goblins who ducked, dodged, crawled under furniture and ran rampant, cutting one another off and tagging in and out over who got chased as Rose and Susan rampaged after them.

In the eye of the storm, I sat on the middle of the couch as the cacophony of noise and chaos swirled around me. I tried to keep a straight face, look dead ahead and hoped that I'd just meld into the furniture itself. Until one of the goblins leaped onto my lap and hung off me by my neck like a miniature bar floozy. She gave me a mischievous smile and a pair of very dangerous eyes. I've seen that look in a monster before, and that wasn't a good sign. She closed in and planted a very wet and exaggerated kiss on my cheek and giggled. All the while, her eyes were never on me but on Rose and Susan on the other side of the table; who were now looking on, furious.

I was going to say something—I really wanted to—but I didn't have enough time to catch a breath and articulate anything. Rose and Susan, equally enraged, pounced and, in a single bound, went airborne on an intercept course. It all happened in slow motion; I could

see exactly how things would pan out when the girl quickly scrambled and jumped free of the imminent collision. The force of her jumping free pushed me back into my seat, and Rose and Susan slammed into me. The couch couldn't take the force, and it tipped over on its back, the three of us along with it. Lying on the floor now was some modern art piece of various limbs, torsos and a couple of tails sticking out of a big mess. Meanwhile, the goblins all giggled.

I could see the spirals in Rose and Susan's eyes; and judging by how the world was spinning, I'm pretty sure mine were too. I could hear the chorus of giggles from the goblins. Yeah, you girls are lucky we're just playing games. Even I started to lose my patience. These two were holding back, even I could tell that much, but they were really starting to push their luck and getting near a dangerous threshold of my cost benefit of revenge versus getting the hell out of Vilmheim.

The giggling kept going until our savior had arrived. The hobgoblin Dolly had snuck up on the pack of hyenas and, like a Newton's cradle, slammed the head of the girl on the far right until the chain reaction carried the blow onto utmost left, sounding off like a series of coconut clonking together. Each of the goblins grabbed their heads in pain and squatted down on the floor moaning, complaining and making themselves a nuisance even during their punishment.

“Laven and Big Sisters, guests.” Dolly said sternly.

I say sternly; but with that perpetual dopey look on her face, even frowning and trying to look upset, she still looked ridiculous and non-threatening despite her improbable and overwhelmingly brutish strength. That was a hobgoblin though. Even if the goblins were rather clever in a mischievous trouble causing way, they still all listened to Dolly like she was infallible. She wasn't any taller than her peers, and she didn't look much different except for one errant horn on her head which was lopsided and three times the size of the other, and the breasts which were as big as her head bouncing against her otherwise petite body. Her strength might be greater than all five of them combined though.

“I thought I told you girls to behave.” Frank said walking through the doorway.

“Sir, we're sorry, sir!” They all said getting back to their feet and saluting.

No, we weren't at Frank's house, with his bulldog of a wife. We

were holed up in his office which also served as a... well a barracks for the goblin girls I guess. Nestled deep inside a small quaint building, away from the windows, was this little meeting room meant to discuss business with clients. Frank himself, the middle-aged potbellied but stern and kind foreman I had met yesterday was one of the few people Rose and Susan could fall back on. After hearing the story, Frank didn't even hesitate. He agreed to help and didn't even want to be paid. Maybe our sad little story stirred his heart? Maybe he's just a genuine kind soul? I'm grateful for whatever the reason is.

“So, it's gotta be tonight.” Frank declared.

Frank plopped himself down onto one of the chairs opposite the couch. After untangling ourselves and settling down the goblins, under firm gaze of taskmaster Dolly, lifted the couch back up and pushed it back into place. Seating myself back into the center with Rose and Susan on my right and left; we began our strategy meeting. The goblins fanned out across the room, and Dolly returned to Frank stood next to his chair, and when he ruffled her hair with one hand while speaking to us, she smiled brightly and giggled softly. Like a puppy, almost.

“Sooner the better.” I said sighing relieved. “I don't think we have any time to wait.”

“They're gonna learn you're not here eventually.” Frank stated. “News gets around fast. You're gonna get through new town before word gets back, but they'll be on you after that.”

“Not a problem!” Rose said clenching her fist dramatically. “Once we're in the open, they can keep coming as much as they want.”

“To stay back and volley projectiles at us.” Susan sighed.

That put a damper on Rose's mood; who, instead of responding, crossed her arms and went silent into deep thought. Was that seriously your plan Rose? This isn't some show where you take the fight outside the city and in the middle of nowhere just to save on production costs.

“We must carefully choose out next destination. I am under the suspicion that Vilmheim is surrounded on all flanks by nations of varying hostility. No doubt news has traveled far enough that troublesome company will soon be on our heels.”

“The Church.” I brooded.

That was a thought that put Susan and I reeling back into silence. Our last encounter had ended in our favor, but not without costs. Ones that will, with time, no doubt give me an acute case of PTSD. Seeing Goose shot down in front of me didn't help either. It was quite a graphic death to witness. I'd seen people hurt here, indirectly killed in brutal ways, but seeing it in person, with my own eyes, had a terrible weight to it. Only Rose seemed unaffected by the idea of going head to head with the Church.

“No big deal.” She cheerfully said. “They don't have anything I'm scared of. They can try to get their hands on Laven.” Her voice then became quite dire and serious, “Next time I'm not holding back if someone lays their mitts on my husband.”

“Ahem.” Susan coughed loudly. “We need a safe path out of Vilmheim first. Now that the gracious Mr. Guts and his laborers have involved themselves.”

Everyone in the room went deep into thought. Except Dolly but that's goes without saying. It was Rose's head that jerked up first, and she jumped up like something had lit her ass on fire.

It all came pouring out of her mouth at once, “Somewhere the Church ain't got the gall to go... A demon realm!”

Everyone went quiet, and no one seemed ready to second that motion.

“Whoa now.” Frank said with a worrisome tone. “You don't just stroll through a demon realm. Besides. You're monsters with a human that you're well... Kind of...”

“Lovey Dovey~!” One of the goblins teased.

They all started to giggle and laugh, but the three of us seemed out of the loop, and Frank had a serious face as he looked down deep in thought.

“Yeah.” Rose said, stalling to article and defend her idea. “I've walked through 'em before. They're a little weird, but nothing to-”

“With your husband?” Frank interrupted.

“No?” Rose titled her head wondering what Frank was trying to say.

He rubbed the back of his head, even Frank was now blushing. “Well, these are just things I hear, but I don't have a reason to think they ain't the truth. Demon realms have a lot of that energy stuff. Lots of, well, lust and stuff. Maybe you go in there, and you all don't feel like leaving.”

“Wait.” I said, that last part sounded a little serious. “What do you mean not leaving?”

“Just places that turn into demon realms. Anyone not getting out of them in time when they turn, well no one else leaves. No one human at least, certainly only anyone single. Men don't last long single in those parts.”

“I-I think we can handle a l-little magical subliminal suggestion.” Susan said blushing and stumbling over her words.

“Stay forever? That's boring.” Rose declared. “That sounds like no more adventures. No more fighting. There ain't no fun in that.”

Frank sighed, and everyone went quiet. So that was the only option, was it? Heading deep into the demon realms I've only heard of. Everyone made them sound like some sort of hell on earth. Cursed lands with stories around them the likes you'd tell disobedient children to get them to shut up and go to bed. But that's only the first problem.

“What about after?” I asked. “We can just assume we slip through one of these places. Where to after?”

“Somewhere we can easily lose anyone tracking us.” Rose said crossing her arms.

“A nation which is not within the Church's sphere of influence.” Susan added.

Rose's eyes lit up as she pounded her clenched claw in an open palm. Some idea had leaped into that thick head of hers.

“The Mountains. They're south of here. Same direction we need to go anyways. Think they called 'em the Wyrmbacks.”

“Some manner of hinterland?” Susan asked.

“It might be high up, but even then, it's still summer there.” Rose said dubiously, wondering what Susan was going on about.

“No Rose.” I said, holding back a headache. “Does anyone live there.”

“Yeah, yeah. They don't bother with anyone though. We don't start trouble, they won't mind us.”

Great. So we need to flee through Switzerland without passports. Sounds like fun. I'd have to once more become Hannibal and appear where it was impossible.

Frank responded with a dubious tone, “The Wyrmbacks? You're not serious are you? You'd scale those death traps? Even if did, you'd have to pass through Beitterheim first. That's Vilmheim's second largest city. You'd be going right back into the fire. And getting across the Marru River. That's not just some water you can swim over-”

“Tsk tsk tsk.” Rose clicked her tongue and waved her finger at Frank. “We just need to get over Marru Bridge.”

“The one under control of Duke Billum? You think he'd even-”

“We'll figure that out when we get there.” Rose said with finality.

I didn't have any clue what we were talking about anymore. After a few eras under the sand, neither did Susan. We were running out of time though. If Rose was the only one with a plan, as dreadful a thought as that was, we didn't have much choice. We'd slip out of Vilmheim tonight, race across the countryside south through a demon realm, hopefully come out the other side, shake off any followers and with the time we bought, get passage across a mighty river in a sheer mountainous region where we'd completely lose anyone following us. I suppose we weren't going to do any better...

There wasn't anything else to say. Frank and his girls had arranged our escape, and we'd be on our way. A rather simple means of escape. Frank was involved in the construction and reconstruction business. The walls around old Vilmheim needed to be repaired. On the south side of the city, there was a crane used to hoist stones to the top of the wall. We'd sneak in with a load of stones and be lifted right up and over the wall. Then we'd run like hell. With their strength, the goblins could build not a solid pile of stones, but one with an empty space within it. Rose had enough strength to remove at least one.

It wasn't much of a plan, but it's all we had. These demon

realms—I was told later—were no small plots of land. It would take two days and one night of rest to get through. But to go around one to our south could take a week. We'd gain five days on anyone chasing after us. It was simple and easy enough. What worried me was the demon realm itself. I just had a bad feeling.

Chapter 31

A sunny clear day did nothing to brighten up my somber disposition and the looming prospect of our destination failed to instill me with confidence. I had been assured that the three of us would be safe inside the town south of Vilmheim. No one would dare pursue us that far, they said. I wasn't convinced.

I'm not sure what information Frank based his assumptions on because I distinctly recall Zerin was using monsters to do his dirty business. No man nor woman with a shred of sanity would willingly enter a demon realm, so everyone kept telling me, but what about those girls who acted like they had nothing left to lose? They seemed like determined killing machines with no humanity left to lose. What was stopping them from following us? I didn't care how sunny or clear any day was; no day was a good day to be hounded by demented religious zealots. Given my choice between the devil I know and the one I don't, I'd rather take the risk with the demon realm than have another run in with the Church so soon. Maybe the repenting and self loathing monster girls were a rarity. If so, this plan still had a chance.

Were those girls not common knowledge? Perhaps I had stumbled upon some secret that the Church would not want revealed. I should have said something back in town. This kind of news would cause quite a stir if anyone would believe me. The headlines could read "Church Contracting Enemy to Fight Evils of the Realms". Yeah, right. Just cite the fugitive 'terrorist' as the source. Sounds legit to me.

I really need to shelve my fear of capture, torture and death... After all, I had new, different and immediate problems to think about. In order to reach the border city of Beitterheim and escape into the Wyrmbacks, we'd have to cross through a dangerous territory. Everyone kept calling them Demon Realms. Areas of the world cut off from civilization that have fallen completely under the influence of monsters. These aren't just forests and wild lands either. They are former villages, towns and cities. What separates them from monster filled woods? They are populated by men in addition to their wives. Their monstrous wives.

Apparently, these places are saturated with some kind of energy-like magic. A cocktail of all sorts of magic that makes an ideal breeding ground for the next generation of monsters. That must mean an abundance of children and a legion of listless bachelorettes who have yet to move on in search of their own mate. That part scared me the most. I've had a surge in my popularity recently.

“I spy with my little eye... something yellow.” Rose said cheerfully on my right.

I spent the past couple of hours completely lost in thought, tuned out and walking on auto pilot with these two girls beside me this whole time. They hadn't raised their voices and didn't seem ready to fight, but...

“Something yellow.” Rose said again, leaning over to look past me at Susan walking on my left. “Come on. What is it? Come on.”

Susan let out an exaggerated sigh and an equally tired answer, “Wheat.”

“Correct!” Rose applauded. “Okay, your turn.”

I could almost see Susan's eye twitching, but she still mumbled something.

“I spy something there hasn't been for three hours.”

“Oh? A hard one. Hmmm. A trick question. Do I get to narrow it down? Is it the ocean? Pretty sure the ocean isn't...”

“It's silence!” Susan yelled coming to a stop, dragging the two of us to a halt as well. “Hour after hour of these incessant juvenile games! Twenty three times you have spied wheat, thirteen times the sky, five times the road and six times the occasional tree. Do you not understand that you have a meagre and unimpressive list of objects of limited color to draw upon?”

“You're just mad I'm winning. You guessed 'em wrong the first few times, but it's still four and one for me now.”

“Why you...”

“Ahem!” I cleared my throat loudly between them to break up the fight. “Can we keep moving? We need to get to this place by nightfall.”

Rose pouted, and Susan gave out a sigh of relief. Then Rose turned her attention back on me, wrapping her arms around mine and looking up at me.

“Laven~, I spy with my little eye, something blue.”

“The sky, Rose?” I answered.

“Nope.” She said with a smirk on her face.

Her face got closer and closer as she was gazing right into my eyes. She got closer and closer until something black and furry came in from a blind spot and pushed her face away. Rose gave out a short little grunt of surprise as the paw squished her nose and shoved her away.

“Did you not forget how careful we must be so near to this 'demon realm'?” Susan came barreling in, leaning on my left shoulder and shouting over at Rose. “Can you not restrain yourself for just two days?”

Rose pinched her nose between her thumb and index realigned it and shouted back, “Yeah? Well, you're one to talk!”

Rose pointed her other index finger at Susan accusing; the anubis having drawn in and sandwiching my arm between her breasts, and my hand down low pressed up against her pelvis. Susan slowly looked down and back up at me. She gave out a yelp and tried to leap back while still holding onto my arm and nearly dragging me along with her until Rose caught my other arm and dragged me back the other way, once again making me the rope in a tug 'o' war. I tried to get a word in, but they seemed to have entered another jealousy skirmish. This time it set up and exploded rather suddenly. What could have possibly... Then I saw something. Something partially hidden behind a bush along the road.

Ignoring my own predicament and dislocating shoulders, I spoke out, “Hold up, what's with this sign?”

The pulling stopped, and the two looked in the same direction. They each let go, walked over to the sign and together pulled away the branches and twigs to reveal the sign behind the overgrowth. The runes and symbols on the sign were beyond me. They were alien and looked something like old Germanic or Norse runes if I had to compare them to something. I'm no cryptologist or linguist so it was beyond me to make heads of tails of it. That didn't stop Susan though, whose eyes were already darting bark and forth over the sign, analyzing it.

“Repeated symbols here and here, in conjunction with this singular rune giving focus to this over here and similar to this...”

Rose looked a little zoned out with disbelieving eyes as she looked at the two of us staring at this sign for well over thirty seconds.

“It says, 'Springbrook ahead'.” She said dryly.

Susan looked at her rather puzzled with a hint of shock on her face.

“Springbrook.” Rose repeated. “You can read can't you?”

Susan exploded, “If you know say something! I am well versed in over twenty languages, all of which are likely dead and forgotten. You will have to excuse me for a lack of knowledge about some juvenile set of symbols created long after my burial in the Pharaoh's tomb.”

Rose cleaned out her ear with a finger, an unimpressed look on her face as she threw her next curve ball, “You speak it just fine.”

“Mere coincidence!” Susan shouted. “No more peculiar than Laven's proficiency given his place of origin.”

“Heh.” Rose snorted. “A sign like this ain't no hurdle for my husband. Isn't that right?”

Rose looked at me with eyes full of expectation as she tried to hammer in the last few nails in Susan's embarrassment. I had to roll my eyes and look away.

“Coincidences abound but not infinitely, Rose.” Susan said, collecting herself and saying in a calm voice. “Laven has no reason to possess the ability to decipher this script. No more than I.”

“What are you talking about?” Rose asked, a slight chuckle of disbelief in her words.

“Laven's home. No doubt fantastically different from this realm.”

“Oh? You mean the place they call 'Ground'?”

The way Susan's face twisted was actually pretty funny. I don't think I could have done a better job expressing, 'What the hell is she talking about?' any better if I tried. Her head slowly and methodically turned toward me and those eyes begged for an answer. The poor girl was stumped. I simply shook my head and tried to say without words that it would be better just to leave it. Thankfully, Susan was clever enough to pick up on that and rapidly changed the subject.

“Springbrook. We have walked for some time now. This is most likely the town.”

“How can you be so sure?” I asked. “We've only been walking for about three hours. That seems a little close.”

Rose, with her hands on her hips and proud to show what she knows, spoke up, “Because, look!”

She waved her claw and pointed far ahead, down the path and between the fields and small clusters of trees. In the distance, the fields disappeared and were replaced by nature. Neglect had allowed the wilderness to reclaim what was once her own. The nicely kept and flattened dirt road became barely a road at all. It became uneven with rocks, weeds and even a shrub or two poking up from the dirt. Someone wasn't taking care of this road from this point on. I think I understood what Rose was getting at. The common folk, anyone sane at that, wouldn't want to stray any closer. If a demon realm was a place where monsters ran free, you could easily be abducted, squeezed dry or kidnapped and held hostage... The stories ended the same, no one ever returned.

There was also a feeling in the air, faint but foreboding, and if I had to take a guess, this is what demonic energy felt like. Like an invisible miasma, a dome placed on top of what was once a town beyond the hills, forest and underbrush. Some time ago, it was just a simple town on the outskirts of the city. A place for the farmers to tend to the fields, close enough for a day trip into the city. It couldn't be any more obvious unless you'd mark a line on a map. This was a point of no return. If we're still half a day's walk until we reach the town, and this cloud hangs over this town in all directions, then it would be quite the barrier. I kept telling myself that sneaking through was going to work. But honestly, I had no idea what to expect.

As the three of us pressed onwards, I started to get worried by how quiet Susan and Rose had become. They stopped making jabs at each other and starting fights as soon as we crossed the threshold. The mood became somber and tense, and I began to miss the acts of childish and immature playfulness from them both. The brisk spring afternoon was long gone, and it had been replaced by a warm humid front. Although there was no mist or fog bank, I still felt like I was breathing in something that was sticking to the back of my throat. I was finding myself out of breath far easier than before... Or maybe I was just breathing harder because I think I was also wearing a thin layer of sweat as the mugginess felt like the temperature had suddenly risen

about five degrees.

Rose and Susan's faces were frozen in determined gazes as they locked their eyes on the path ahead of us. Neither of them stole a glance at me or each other. Their breathing also picked up and became heavier, the same as me. I could feel that all the demonic energy couldn't possibly be good for myself, but what was it like for these two?

That oppressive atmosphere hung in the air and only got worse the further we trekked through the reclaimed farmland. I half expected we would push our way through some trees to see a scorched earth wasteland, but that never happened. I guess I would just have to accept that when they say 'demon' they don't really mean hell. Although the muggy air got thicker, I got acclimatized to it somewhat. It eventually downgraded from walking through a sauna to a jungle rainforest on a hot day. At least I didn't feel like I was about to keel over and collapse on the ground.

Our resilience after hours of this march through the tainted woods finally crested us over a hill which overlooked Springbrook in the distance. Old stone and wooden buildings amid a forest of young trees, many of which hadn't grown taller than the buildings they grew between (and sometimes within). No care had been taken to hold back the coming tide of green as though the inhabitants were not bothered by or couldn't be bothered to do anything about it. The town itself seemed to have fallen to ruins. Populated ruins but not even a finger had been lifted to maintain this town for what could be two or three decades at least.

We couldn't have arrived a moment too soon. The sun was on its descent, and it would soon be dark, and I certainly didn't want to camp out in the open with a demon realm. Not that this town wasn't without its own set of risks, the miasma was at its thickest by far, and I don't think there would be a single voice of dissent if I claimed this place was the source of everything. Once we were within the limits of the town, the true nature of this place revealed itself.

Concentrated in this small space were the inhabitants of this strange land, both man and monster. Men of all ages, monsters of all types, more than I could identify or care to take inventory of. There wasn't a single human woman in sight, and all the children were girls and took after their mothers. The children laughed and played as they ran through the streets, but the streets they ran through weren't the most wholesome environment. Moaning, incessant moaning and

groaning. Slapping and wet bodies sliding on top of, under and against each other. The whole town seemed to be one big massive... well... orgy. Paired off into mating pairs and off in their own little worlds there seemed to be sex going on everywhere. Everyone seemed to be caught in sort of trance, and the sloppy and dopey looks on everyone's faces told me no one seemed too concerned with anything that wasn't the other body pressing up against them. Those sleeping or taking a break seemed to be the minority in this place. It was now that I finally understood everything that I had been warned of. This was a realm ruled by lust and nothing but lust.

"Aw wa wa wa~" Susan blabbered while looking a little delirious and overstimulated.

She didn't seem to be the kind of girl who handled salacious and lewd things like this very well. I wasn't one to boast, however, even I was turning beet red. This was far too much for me. Even the carefree Rose seemed troubled. Her face wasn't stuck in a state of pure shock and awe like Susan's and mine. She had said this wasn't her first time passing through, but even she couldn't hide how her face was flushing. At the very least our presence as outsiders didn't seem to draw even the slightest attention. Not even a glance was thrown our way as we walked the streets of the city toward its center. Each and every pair of eyes seemed glazed over, unfocused, dull and completely engrossed in the act of love making.

That was until the children finally noticed something odd, namely us. They were so desensitized to the happenings around them that the three of us who were the abnormality. We had been in the town less than five minutes and, like a trio of cliché tourists, stuck out like sore thumbs. All the little girls shadowed us from the alleyways, windows and around. They kept their distance and observed, giggling and pointing, daring each other to be the first one to speak with us. I would rather they did not. I'm not sure what kind of games they learned to play growing up in a place like this, left to their own devices while their parents screwed like rabbits somewhere else.

At least that one wish was granted, but I was only granted another nightmare when our arrival and the attention of all the children summoned our auspicious host.

"Hello~ Good evening and how do you do~!" Sang out a voice that descended from the sky.

As soon as I laid my eyes on her, I realized she was

dangerous. Her form was similar to one I had only seen before with curled demonic horns protruding from her forehead, long elven ears drooping from the sides of her head, long, radiant and perfectly straight glossy black hair a devil's spade whipping behind her as she glided down to the ground before us with bat-like wings. After a perfect two point landing with her scantily clad breasts bouncing to and fro suggestively and her hands on her waspish waist, she looked straight at me. It was a gaze that sent alarm bells off somewhere deep inside my head. The reaction was instinctual. She was dangerous. She was also a succubus; I knew that much. This wasn't some old woman in a new form. Her eyes said otherwise. They were red, a deep hellfire red, full of malice twisted into a seductive gaze; they probed for weakness but were strangely inviting.

"New sheep for the flock? What a lovely pair, and..." She paused and gave me a careful look over, from top to bottom appraising me. "a delectable specimen..."

I felt my skin crawl as the succubus licked her lips and narrowed her eyes. My instincts almost had me spinning one hundred and eighty degrees to bolt, but Rose and Susan who had both been silent and withdrawn lunged in front of me to block the woman's advance. While I was scrambling and succumbing to a primal fear, the two of them came to my defense.

"Oh ho ho ho ho~ You three are so... precious." She menaced; her laugh haunting. "I don't feed off the leftovers of others so don't you two worry." She then gave a curtsy, daintily lifting up an imaginary dress skirt. "I am Milonia. You could say I am the mayor of Springbrook although there isn't much I need to do."

My initial shock of this succubus's sudden appearance faded away, and my senses returned. My mind had shifted to first and moved its way back to top gear. I slowly fortified my defenses and came to understand everything. At least I liked to think I did. My intuition told me the difference in presence between this Milonia and the succubus in Vilmheim was that this was a pure blooded one. The muggy miasma that hung in the air within this realm seemed to be thicker in this woman's presence, and it came off of her like waves. It radiated in regular pulses and blanketed the place with sexual energy like fallout from some radioactive material. It wasn't cancer and cell failure you'd get though; it was insatiable lust. This wasn't just some ordinary monster. This devil was on another level completely.

I took a deep breath and took a step forward, back to where

I was before to make my stand, “The name is Laven. We're just passing through, and we need a place to stay the night.”

I did my best to say it calmly, but Milonia's face cracked into a twisted smile as if I said something funny or my voice squeaked. When she laughed again Rose moved her claw to the hilt of the sword sheathed on her back, and Susan readied her staff in both paws. She didn't even seem to be bothered by the two of them readying themselves to fight. She simply continued to laugh until she was almost out of breath then stopped abruptly. Looking at her feet, she slowly rolled her gaze upwards to stare me.

With a wide smile on her face, “Certainly, sir. A room for tired travelers is the least hospitality I can offer. Follow me.”

With a few flaps of her wings she hovered in the air and floated backwards. Rose and Susan exchanged glances with each other and then back to me, and all I could do was shrug. 'We may as well' I said with body language. They both dropped out of their defensive stances, but they didn't give up on escorting me. Rose took the lead with Susan following behind, and they both stayed very close. She was noisy. Noisy and intrusive. Even all the noise she was making didn't seem to bother the men and monsters lining the streets or those we could hear inside their crumbling and dilapidated houses. We merely weaved through them like we were ghosts.

“We get many newcomers.” Milonia said while hovering around us in a circle. “Monsters aren't always safe, especially not their husbands. Not all monsters are so big and strong like you two. I hope you don't hold it against us for having to live like this.”

There was some hint of sarcasm in her voice. She was playing the pity card for some reason, and I wasn't buying it.

“A lot of newcomers but never just visitors. You'll have to forgive me. I thought you were pulling my leg... You aren't joking, right?”

“Definitely not.” Susan blurted out, her patience dwindling at last.

“Yeah.” Rose said following suit and coming to a stop to face off with the devil. “What she said. We're on an adventure.”

“Oh ho~ An adventure? A man and two monsters?” Milonia said flying around the three of us just out of arm's reach. “What kind of

adventure might such an odd group like yourselves be on? Maybe you're looking for something? Now I'm curious... Real curious. What could be a better destination or reward than what you'll find here?"

"We're- hmmph!" Rose was about to blurt it all out when Susan and I jumped in and covered up her mouth.

Milonia thought this was all very amusing when she burst out laughing and somersaulted backwards in the air.

"Oh~ You are something else. A secret mission is it? Now I'm even more curious... But! I'll leave it at that. You three are tired. Are you not? A nice long rest. A nice. Long. Rest. Is what you three need. Yes?"

Every word out of this woman's mouth seemed to be two-faced. Each word laden with venom. Not a vile deadly venom as though she was threatening us; she was more like a used car salesman or a very charismatic and fast talking charlatan that was trying to sell us a time share. I remember what Frank said and all the other stories about demon realms I've heard since I arrived in this world. I wasn't keen on getting stuck in Hotel California or eating pomegranate seeds of the underworld.

Before long Milonia came to a stop and pointed the three of us toward a building. A lone building situated just adjacent of the town's main square, home to a statue that had crumbled long ago, what it originally symbolized long eroded away. The fountain was long absent of flowing water, and the gardens were left untended and filled with weeds. It was hardly The Ritz.

"Please. Make yourselves at home. This is one of my houses. You can have it to yourselves. I understand all this can be a little different. Not many people here care about personal space. You understand?"

"No." I said poignantly. "Not at all."

"Well. I'm sure you will." More venom in her words, dripping from each word. "Please. Stay as long as you need... As long as you want." With one last twisted smile she flew off into the sky and vanished behind the trees and shattered rooftops.

Once she left I was made fully aware of the presence she had. Once she was out of sight, and the sound of her wings beating through the air subsided it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulder.

Rose and Susan's shoulders dropped as well, and they both sighed.

“Types like her give me the creeps.” Rose sighed. “Can't tell what they're thinkin'.”

“I am certain I know exactly what goes on in that sick and twisted mind of hers.” Susan growled. “Her heart is black. Black as twilight.”

“Maybe we should just keep walking after all. The two of you don't look well.” I suggested.

“No!” Susan blurted suddenly. She took a deep breath and calmly reassured me, “This is nothing, my liege. Everything is still under control. I am in control.”

“She may look powerful, but she ain't no fighter. I'd like her to try something. I'll tear her apart...” Rose said menacingly.

There was definitely something very wrong. Rose was worked up, the flame on her tail an inferno. Susan was standing her ground; her eyes deadlocked, unblinking and cast downward. I turned around and surveyed the town and saw in all directions the townsfolk carrying on with their embraces and intercourse. In the distance, the children appeared again now that the succubus had left. From the windows, I spotted grown monsters watching us. Watching me. They were dangerous gazes. There was no way I was going to walk my way out of this alone. If these two were so convinced that everything was fine there wasn't much I could do.

Chapter 32

The three of us bravely took our first steps through the open doorway, the wooden door long since torn off or rotted away. Inside, it was dark, dusty, and it looked like the world's worst tenant had been renting the place for years. No one bothered to fix anything or even clean. Beyond the dark there was a faint light up some stone stairs. Like moths to a flame three of us followed the light to its source. Inside a room on the second floor was a jarring scene. It was a room unlike the others. It was clean, the furniture well kept and intact. The walls were painted red, waxed hardwood floors, luxurious rugs, the smell of fresh flowers and potpourri floated within the walls, and situated right in the middle of the room was a large canopy bed with fresh red silken sheets. Scattered around the room were dozens of small candles and each one looked freshly lit. There was something wrong. Something very wrong.

I approached the bed and felt the curtains with my hands. It felt real. My hand didn't pass through anything. I could pull on it, and it even held my weight when I leaned back. It had mass, so it certainly wasn't an illusion, but this place stuck out like a sore thumb. The rest of the town was a ruin. It was as if an apocalypse had happened, and everyone was living in the fallout. A very licentious apocalypse but an apocalypse nonetheless.

“Laven.” Rose called out behind me.

I didn't pay attention the first time. I barely heard her, barely noticed her too. My head was still reeling from trying to run every possibility through my head.

“Laven~” Rose called out again.

“R-rose, wait!” I heard Susan cry out, “What do you think you are-”

I turned around to see Rose already in a state of undress. Her bikini top had already fallen to the floor; her claws were untying the strings holding her armored half skirt to her waist which clattered and clanked as it hit the ground. Finally, she bent over; with her thumbs wrapped around the strings of her underwear, she pulled down her bikini bottom to her ankles. At the entrance to the room, completely naked, she straightened her back; ample breasts bouncing up and down. Slowly, she slipped one leg out from the pile of clothes huddled around the talons of her feet, and then she slipped the other out. She walked toward me, slowly, seductively.

I glanced at Susan; who had been standing beside her and watching the whole time. She shot me back a face that probably mirrored my own. 'What the hell is going on', her face screamed. I looked back and saw Rose had closed the gap between me and her rather quickly. With her index finger, she traced her talon over the leather jerkin covering my chest. A warm smile on her face. I could feel the heat pouring off her; it was an overpowering heat that blasted away the miasma lingering in the air surrounding us since we entered this place. This was a heat I remember well. It was different from the heat of battle... Now I knew what was going on.

“Rose, hold-” I tried saying but...

“Laven~” Rose cooed. She looked up and locked her eyes with mine. Her amber eyes were glistening. “Laven...” She repeated while wrapping her claws around my neck and pressing herself up against me.

“Rose. Don't do this. Not now. This is a trap, you need to-”

“Laven. I'm not so good with words.” Rose said interrupting me, pressing a talon up against my lips. “I just wanna say... I want you to know... I love you. So much.”

The talon pressed up against my lip slid down and reached for the buttons holding my leather jerkin together; and with a quick slice with the edge of her talon, she cut them off; and with her claws on my shoulder, she rolled it off my chest. Unable to contain herself and unable to stop her myself, she tore my shirt off with one quick movement. That ripping sound of fabric shook me awake from a daze, and I frantically looked over Rose's head at Susan still quivering at the entrance to the room.

“Susan!” I called out, “Help!”

There wasn't any help on its way. Susan was a deer caught in headlights. She was flushed, quivering; her eyes darted every which way. Her body was frozen; her mind going a mile a minute trying to process everything she was seeing. She definitely was weak against this kind of thing. I wasn't any better. I wasn't able to put up any kind of resistance when Rose walked forward, pushing me along with her until I fell back onto the bed, and she crawled on top of me, straddling my waist. Untying the ribbon in her crimson hair and tossing it away, she leaned over; her face hovering just above my own. Her hair, now long and wild, tickled my face.

“Before you came along. I... I...” Rose said, every word and breath brushing up against my face. The scent of burning pine, a wash of pheromones, thick as fog flowed into me, “Every day was fun, but something was missing. The fun never stayed long. Since I met you... Every day has been. Every moment has been...”

I'm not sure what was going through her head; she kept talking as her face got closer and closer until she silenced herself by pressing her lips up against mine. It was as if there was a disconnect between her body and mind, but all inhibitions in both had been cut loose. As soon as her lips touched against mine, she suddenly turned into a different beast all together. Her tongue slipped loose, and she forcefully slipped it between my lips and pursued my own tongue with her own. It was very much like her; it was like an attack, and every movement spurred her on. She shifted her weight on top of me and ground herself on top of me, pinning me to the bed.

Her long tongue played and danced around my own, and her heavy and hot breaths through her nose tickled me with every pant. Every moment the heat from her body poured into myself, and the familiar intoxicating side effect was building up. The voice of reason—warning me that this was all very dangerous right now—was getting quieter, pushed further and further into oblivion as Rose's heat blasted all the doubts away. That might also be because I was having a hard time breathing. Rose's longer than average tongue explored, attacked and pillaged every corner of my mouth and even near the back of my throat. I had a hard time just breathing through my nose every time she dug deep and greedily.

I felt the strength to resist fade away from my arms, and they were about to rise on their own to wrap around Rose, but a shrill and sobering shriek echoed throughout the room.

“Cease and desist at once! Where exactly do you think we currently are? Do you not remember the warnings and lives put on the line for our sakes?” Susan shouted and lectured the two of us.

Rose pulled back, and I joined her in breathing heavily. She then sat back up and turned to face Susan at the door.

“Back off.” She hissed. “I'm not good with words. So I'm gonna tell my husband just how much I love him with everything else I got.”

“That's not what I-”

“You want him? Stop talking. Fight me.”

Susan's eyes went wide and then narrowed into a menacing scowl, “A fight is what you desire? You persist on doing this because you claim love for that Pharaoh...”

Susan's face twisted into a frown. She cast her eyes downward at her paw which she held to her chest, feeling the heart beats.

“If it is a fight you desire, then it is a fight you shall receive. My duty. My loyalty, feelings and... and my...”

Susan was stumbling with her words, and she clenched the paw over her heart into a fist. She looked up with a look of renewed determination, a look shrouded behind a flush red on her cheeks. Aw shit... No...

“Susan, don't do-” I tried to stop her, but that was futile as the words got caught in my throat.

Susan lifted the golden tiara off her head. It was very slow, methodical, and the way she was almost trembling with embarrassment made it oddly erotic. She held it in front of her, then let it drop to the floor in front of her. On the hardwood, it let out a loud metallic clang. One by one, the gold ornaments in her long black hair fell onto a pile on the floor in front of her. She removed the ornate Egyptian collar around her neck and let that fall onto the pile in front of her. All the ornaments of wealth and status she carried with her, she shed them off one after another. Eventually, she stood at the doorway illuminated by the candlelight in just her tube top, underwear and loose pant leggings.

She was visibly trembling now, and it wasn't because of the cold. Her tanned skin was flushing red around her face, yet she continued; she wouldn't be stopped now. Rose and I could only watch, each of us captivated. Even in the tomb... She hadn't gone this far. It had been dark, a faint light made her barely visible in that small crevice we cowered in. Now she was fully visible, and she was taking off her armor, both the seen and unseen. Her paws slowly untied the pant leggings from her panties, and the dark blue satin rustled and fell to the floor around her ankles. Firmly grabbing hold of her tube top, she pulled it off in one quick pull, but held her arms over her breasts until she slowly returned her arms to her side; her firm sizable breasts falling gently back into place. With her next ounce of courage, she untied her underwear; the knot now revealed with her pant leggings

gone. With her other paw, she quickly pulled it off, but her bushy black tail stuck between her legs covered herself on instinct.

Her perky jackal ears, sitting on the top of her head, pressed down as she squirmed further in embarrassment. Eventually she steeled herself and let herself relax, and her tail pulled away, and in the candlelight Susan stood tall, rigid and squirming in embarrassment. Naked. It seemed like a herculean task for her to do; Rose and I were still stunned. That meant neither of us did a thing as she walked across the floor. Her tanned skin completely revealed. Small, soft and orange-pinkish nipples crowning her breasts, and womanhood exposed between her legs as she marched toward the bed. Rose had let go some time ago, so when I pulled back on instinct I kept going until the back of my skull hit the headboard.

Grasping onto the sheets with her paws, Susan pulled herself onto the bed and started crawling on all fours towards Rose and me. Rose, not to be outdone, tried to lock her knees on each side of me. But together, they met nearly cheek to cheek and took up half of the bed beside me as they approached. Without anywhere to go, I was trapped. Susan reached me first, and her paws grabbed hold of me as she pulled herself on top of me. Rose's came next, and her claws greedily slid across the rest of my body, caressing and massaging me all over. This time Susan came swooping in, her slight height advantage bringing her face right up to mine.

“Pharaoh...” She sighed.

This time was a vastly different experience. A different cloud of pheromones, I sensed the thick scent of cumin and cinnamon as Susan brought herself closer and most strongly when her lips pressed up against my own. Except this time, I felt something wet and slimy; a dainty but rough tongue slipped through and softly, gently caressed my own. Once was all it took, the next moment the restraints were off, and she pressed into me hard as if a flip had been switched. She attacked aggressively and passionately.

It wasn't anywhere near as aggressive as Rose; I could still breathe, but while it didn't have the same wild unrestrained passion, it was reserved, gentle and compassionate. While Susan and I made out, I felt Rose's claws caress my chest, and I felt her tongue slide across my skin and around my nipple. She slowly worked her way up to my collar bone, up my neck, to my ear and then inched Susan out of the way who pulled back after relentlessly kissing me. Rose pressed back in and aggressively surged forward and back to what she left

unfinished before.

I felt a furry paw caress the side of my head, the claws comb through my hair and her soft breath tickle my ear.

"Laven." Susan whispered softly. "I... Too..."

My attention was being ripped forward and back, side to side, so I could hardly grasp everything that was going on, but I definitely heard her loud and clear when she finally said it.

"I love you. You're mine, and I'm yours. This will never change. Come gods or men. It shall always be so, no matter where or when."

Rose pulled away from the embrace. With a soft smile on her face she crawled back down on the bed toward my feet where she tugged the boots off my feet; my pants following afterwards. She didn't even bother to unbuckle my belt, so it actually hurt a little when she yanked them off. Something was definitely wrong. She wasn't thinking straight. Even Rose would normally have better judgement than that, but I was too busy just trying to catch my breath when Susan pushed my head down onto the pillow and straddled my chest. Sitting bare naked and holding me in place, she daintily pulled the gloves from my hands, laid them aside and held my hand against her left breast. I could hear her heartbeat, and it was out of control. Her bushy black tail wagged back and forth, slapping the covers of the bed left and right.

"Outta the way." I heard Rose shout as she pushed Susan from behind, and she slid forward along my chest until she stopped at my face.

Susan let out a cute little shriek. I would have groaned in pain at the sudden impact, but I was smothered as her bare nether regions were thrust into my face. From my lips to my nostrils was pressed up into folds of wet and very warm skin. I was stricken by the sudden feeling of drowning, and when I tried to breath I heard another canine like yelp and a pair of paws grab the sides of my head.

"N-no, don't. Do not move. Cease your breathing. Ah! Pharaoh, no~"

She was asking a lot. I was completely overrun and overwhelmed. I did my best to keep myself under control, but the sensation and scent now wafting directly into my sinus was too much. The levee had burst, and a torrent of blood surged into my member until it felt like it was ready to explode. On cue, the next attack came

from down below, a light prod against my dick and a playful snicker. A familiar, mischievous giggle followed by a loud exaggerated 'om', and I felt an incredible heat and soft wetness wrap itself around my penis.

I spoke heavily muffled, “Whoa, Rose, don-”

“Please, no, Pharaoh! No more, I beg you!” Susan shouted doubling her paws' vice like grip on my head as she leaned over panting and heaving.

Either Rose did not hear me, or she did not care because after teasing and holding still for just a moment, I felt her tongue coil around my shaft and glans inside her mouth. The tips of her razor teeth, sheathed only by the skin of her lips, playfully scrapped and stimulated the sensitive skin as she lifted her head up and dropped back down in sync with the movements of her tongue. My arms, previously frozen-in-shock, came to life as another jolt came from my hips and tried to come to my rescue. I say try because they instinctively went to remove the weight blocking my breath; but instead of pushing Susan away, my hands met with her labia and parted them. I think they might actually be traitors when I think about it.

Susan cried out and moaned in ecstasy over and over again as I tried to breathe. Each time I moved and struggled for breath I only ended up stimulating her more. Eventually, she stopped protesting and started calling out my name over and over again. Not king or Pharaoh but, “Laven. Laven~ Laven!” Each passing moment the wash of pheromones and womanly scent was eating away at my mind and consciousness. Every movement I endured Rose's mouth and tongue was like a battering ram at the fortress of my reason. I'm sure she'd appreciate the metaphor; this seemed to be some big battle between the two of them. I was not only the battlefield; I was the spoils of war, and Rose was proving to be quite the capable general.

My mind was a mess and unable to rally or retrain itself. I felt like I was reaching critical mass, and I wouldn't last much longer. Susan sounded as though she was doing no better; her breaths became shorter by the moment. As if my movements while trying to avoid suffocating were not enough, Susan's hips began to grind against my face, and she pushed herself against me even harder and faster than before. All at once with one last thrust Susan bayed like a wolf, threw her head back and gave out one last scream; a voice filled with ecstasy as she hit orgasm. Rose's movements picked up in pace as my dick throbbed and twitched in her mouth, and my balls pulsated and pulled back in anticipation. With Susan's orgasm, a flood of juices

flowed out, and the raw scent, the scream, the stimulation down below was too much, and I exploded violently into Rose's mouth.

Rose did not release me right away; with every throb, she pulled back and surged forward, milking me of everything she could. When my hips could no longer shake, and I couldn't be squeezed of another drop, she pulled back, sat up with a dribble of white leaking from her mouth, scooped the drool back into her mouth and swallowed in one gulp. Her eyes closed, her smile spread and her face glowed. Not just figuratively, the flame on her tail looked like someone had just dowsed it with lighter fluid because it erupted.

There was finally a short lull, Susan had collapsed and picked herself up, removing herself from my face so I could gasp in long breaths of air. With how thick the smell of sex and the two of them was in the air... it wasn't much clearer. Until Susan shifted her weight and turned around, showing me her back side. Falling on top of me, her privates slid to my face; her tail wagging back and forth. My dick was still recovering when the feeling of the soft downy fur between her paws wrapped around me and held on tight. There was another lull as no one moved, and I was at a loss to what was going on.

“What is the meaning of this...” I heard Susan say disappointed.

“Ha!” Rose laughed. “One nothing for me. Your loss. Little Laven's all tuckered out for now.”

“I am most certainly not done teaching you a lesson yet, Rose.”

My short respite was then interrupted by an eerie red glow. I couldn't see anything with Susan's butt in my face, but the glow reaching the walls and corner of the room was warning enough.

“Susan, don't you dare- you're supposed to be the level headed-”

Wham. All at once from the tip of my glans down to my spine and spreading throughout my body, each and every one of my nerves awoke. For every nerve in my genitals, two- no three stood beside them. It was The Curse of the Mummy all over again. Tie the body, mind and spirit together by force. It's side effect? Increased sensation to stimuli. In this twisted and lewd world, that meant increased sensitivity an unnaturally, maybe unhealthy, extra dose of it. My recovery period was reduced to nothing, and the velvet fur alone was

enough to recall all the blood back to my member which stood ready and at attention. I think I heard Rose click her tongue, a minor defeat. Susan herself whimpered slightly, still hesitant and embarrassed even after coming so far.

There would be no breaks on this ride though. I felt the dainty and hesitant wet sensation of a tongue lick the tip of my glans; a sensation that rebounded off every corner of my being. My hips seized up, and my body was thrown slightly upwards, only held down my Susan's weight on top of me. A yelp of surprise at the reaction but ultimately satisfied with the result, Susan continued and licked again and again. After every bounce, she was a little bolder. Each time she dragged her tongue along my penis a little farther and faster. Each time it felt no less pleasurable than the last. I felt the soft and wet sensation of a cheek as it rubbed against the side of my shaft and a tongue coil up and press against the tip, and then the tip plunged toward her throat. Susan, the calm, calculating and rational anubis had swallowed my dick to its base. She suppressed a cough, the poor girl getting too caught up in the moment and going past her comfort zone rather overzealously.

Even Rose was impressed; I heard awe escape from her lips as Susan held back gagging and whined a little. To her credit and resolve, she pulled back, and my member emerged before she leaned forward and swallowed it in its entirety once again. After deepthroating it a few times, she picked up the pace, and her entire mouth worked together to stimulate and stroke me all at once. I had no strength left for words anymore. I could not hold back the groans and moans escaping from the corner of my mouth; what little space I had that wasn't smothered by Susan. This much still wasn't enough for the two of them though; Rose would not be outdone.

I felt a scaly claw cup and hold up my scrotum; the tendons undulating up and down as the testes inside were massaged and caressed. For a claw which there was always grasping steel, Rose claw managed to be gentle... But not completely gentle. Along with the massage, I felt the tip of something press up against my anus. It was an odd unexpected feeling. I wasn't entirely sure what was going on until that feeling became distinct rather than disappearing. Amid my haze I awoke for just a moment, enough to scream out in my head, “Damn you Victoria!” A dangerous sharp point pressed inwards and violated me, but even that feeling didn't last long. The sharp point, no doubt one of Rose's talons, found its mark. A soft plushy organ hidden behind fleshy walls inside. With the cocktail of passion and lust that had built up, the simplest poke or prod sent a lightning bolt from my

ass, to my spine, to my brain and blew it away. Prostate stimulation.

My body moved on its own. I couldn't move my legs, Rose was no doubt pinning them to the bed. I couldn't move my torso because Susan was lying down on top of me. I couldn't move my head because her butt was on my face, and my arms, my only free limbs, had betrayed me. I spread open Susan once more, and my breaths tickled and stimulated her. This time though there was only one way I was getting any relief. I had to return the favor. As long as Susan had her stamina, she'd stay on top of me. It was time for me to counterattack, so I licked her. Just one little lick and her whole body shook and shuddered. A yelp from the back of her throat vibrated through my penis. Not exactly as planned, but I did it again. I don't even know why anymore, but I did it. Susan built up toward another orgasm, and I was almost boiling over myself, bigger than the last.

Unexpectedly, one rough caress from the talon and a trigger had been pulled. The bullet sped its way through my shaft and exploded suddenly and violently into Susan's mouth. Again she yelped in surprise, but that wasn't the last round. Like a hose spraying water, I painted the back of Susan's throat white; more than I thought was possible rushed out. Each pulse from my prostate caused the muscles in my buttocks to quiver, my hips to shake and thrust and electricity to run wild through my body. The pink and tan skin before my face whited out, and my hearing became shaky as Susan moaned and gave out a muffled orgasm as juices flowed from her into my mouth as I poked and prodded at her with my tongue. A mere moment later than I, the moment my semen touched her; she reacted and orgasmed immediately.

Having suffered twice in a row in such a short period, Susan finally lost her strength and rolled off me. There she laid on the bed. Her eyes were unfocused; her lips pursed and holding something in; her cheeks slightly distended as she breathed through her nose. Imitating Rose from before, she sat back up, titled her head and swallowed. Her face scrunched for a moment afterwards, perhaps disdain for the taste, but afterwards she wore the same glow as Rose.

“You- You didn't have to-” I tried to say, now able to breath and speak again.

“No~” Susan said in a daze. “Every part is sacred. Not a drop must be wasted...”

“Heh.” Rose snorted. “Now that the skirmish is complete...

Let the battle be joined."

Susan shook her head, still in a daze, "Wha- eek!"

Rose pushed her aside, and Susan fell helplessly beside me on the pillows at the head of the bed. Without another second wind left in her she couldn't resist as Rose plopped herself down on my waist and pushed me down onto the bed with her claws on my chest. Her fire was burning bright almost blindingly bright, and her white razor teeth were gleaming as she looked down at me.

"Rookie's mistake in battle. Throwing everything ya got in the first few moves. Now it's my turn."

I looked down and noticed that even after blowing that massive load, I hadn't softened at all. I was as hard as I was before. Rose had worked herself up so much, and there was so much lubrication and fluid that she easily lifted her waist into the air and brought it back down in a hurry, and in one motion I felt a heat that couldn't be rivaled from before wrapping itself around my penis. A heat boarding the thin line between pleasant warmth and scorching pain. Rose's insides rubbed, twisted and squeezed me aggressively. As Rose lowered herself down to the base, her mischievous smile being twisted into a face overcome by ecstasy.

"Can you feel me Laven? Ah~ It's me. Ah~ All this heat...Me."

Leaning back and holding herself up with her claws digging into the bed behind her, she shook her hips back and forth and ground herself against me. Her movements were wild, unpredictable and violent, just like her. Straddling me, with her knees out she lifted herself up and down on my shaft. Cupping her breasts in the palms of her claws, she kneaded herself as her amber eyes dulled and unfocused; her mind going blank; her tongue hanging loosely.

The harder she pushed against me, the more I felt like I was going to fall through the bed, so I reached out and held Rose by the waist. My simple touch causing her back to arc and let out a wail of pleasure. She pulled her head back and looked down at me looking up at her; her face glowing and warm with a smile. That face of hers with that expression was just too much. She fell back down to her knees, and her weight pressed down on my chest. Her breasts squishing and kneading against me. She looked up at me with those ecstasy filled eyes as I rocked my own hips back and forth, sinking my hands into

her buttocks and pulling her closer to me with every thrust we made together. We didn't break eye contact until I picked up the pace, and she buried her cheek into my chest and began to pant hard, quickly approaching her climax.

Beside me the bed sheets ruffled, and Susan pulled herself toward me. Lying on her side she brought her face to mine when I turned to see her, and she locked her lips with mine, slipping her tongue in for a passionate kiss. All the while, I kept moving my hips and thrusting into Rose, lifting her small feminine form into the air with each thrust, and with each thrust she moaned louder, hotter and heavier than before. Susan wrapped her paws around my waist and tilted her head down to press her face as close as she could against my groin. Attacked from both sides, I felt I was soon going to reach my limit as well. When Rose shook one last time and let out a loud cry as she moaned in orgasm, her tight walls inside squeezed down hard, and her tail exploded into an inferno that sent embers in every direction. She heated up so much that I felt my own dick would melt like wax. Instead I oozed and shot a different milky white wax deep into her. My penis pulsated again and again while being massaged, sucked and squeezed by Rose's vagina desperate to milk me again and again without end.

Rose held onto me tight, but eventually she pulled out and fell off me. Plopping onto the other side of the bed, breathing heavily, her fire burned brightly on her tail beside her, swishing back and forth pleasantly. Susan pulled away from the kiss so that she could look upon me, gaze right into my eyes. Not once since that last ejaculation did I go soft. I was still hot, hard and twitching, somehow not sapped of my stamina. I turned on my side and faced Susan who looked at me perplexed and confused as I turned her to face the other way. Lying on my side, I prodded my tip against the entrance to her pussy, something she did not expect. I reached over and groped and kneaded her breasts and felt her heart beat faster and faster as I wrapped myself around her more and more. She moaned.

“Laven, please... Love me.”

She waited with sultry eyes for the reply she wished to hear. I leaned over and kissed her, locking lips with her again. With her paws, she reached down and helped guide me into her. The warmth from Rose was not there, but a more powerful force squeezed down on me as her tight walls tried to keep me from entering but resisted me from pulling back and sucked me back in every time I surged forward again. I felt her tail wag back and forth and brush up against my chest as I

pressed myself up against her back. I felt her heartbeat and her chest rise with every gulp of air she tried to take as our tongues met and mingled in each other's mouths. Fast and furious, my pelvis slapped against her buttocks quicker than before, and I felt myself reaching my limit. One last spurt of speed, and once again I do the impossible and ejaculate inside Susan whose eyes widen in surprise then narrow as the afterglow sends her into a daze as she cums a little.

Even then I was still hard. My thoughts turned only to doing away with this pressure in my loins; something inside that needed to be pushed out. An overflowing energy inside me that needed to be acted upon, expressed and shared. A heat inside me that would not dissipate. I felt every strand of hair I had standing atop goosebumps. Slumping back onto the bed, Susan went limp again, satisfied, while I was not. I noticed Rose stirring and lifting herself back onto her arms as she looked at me, but then her eyes widened in surprise when she notices I am hunched over, breathing hard, wild. I reached out and grabbed Rose by the shoulders who shrunk as I pulled her in and brought her face to mine and to kiss her passionately again. The flame on her tail sputtered and shot out a few flickers of flame, wagging back and forth weakly as I greedily attacked the inside of her mouth with my tongue. An odd change from the regular, as her long lewd tongue is put on the defensive this time.

With wild abandon, I pulled away and pushed Rose on top of Susan who still laid on her back. Rose's head rested between Susan's breasts; the anubis herself still in a daze and looking on in surprise. Straddling behind the two with their pelvis's stacked on one another; their womanhoods almost grinding and pressing together. I surged forward into Rose once more. With a few thrusts, I pulled out and pushed down to enter into Susan, thrust a few times and then returned to Rose. Every so often, I would miss and squeeze myself between the two, sliding between the intercrural-like area between their two pussies. Unable to catch a breath, the two monsters heaved, panted and moaned sweetly as I grunted and groaned and ceaselessly thrust my hips into the two of them. I felt myself reaching yet another climax and picked up my speed, switching between the two of them with a speed and finesse that brought them ever closer to their own orgasms. With perfect synchronization, I blew my load again whilst still inside Rose, rocking my hips gently back and forth to empty the last of that load. Even then I still pulled out my rock hard member and watched as the white essence oozed out of Rose and down onto Susan.

Still spurred on by a cocktail of too many feelings, magics, curses, emotions and wild thoughts, I pulled Rose off Susan and laid

them side by side. Thrusting into Susan this time, I went like a wild beast; my free fingers toying and playing with Rose's folds.

Rose pleaded, “Okay- Ah~ You win Laven. I didn't know you were ah~ playing, but you win~ so you can stop, AH~”

“Pharaoh. Laven, please, eek~ Cease at once, I- I can't think any- ah~” Susan moaned.

But I didn't stop. I kept thrusting and stirring my fingers and switching to the other when I fancied or my arm needed to rest. But my hips never seemed to tire. The heat there never seemed to fail in keeping those muscles warmed and ready for action. I think after cumming lightly another three times, I stopped remembering. I stopped remembering, but I'm sure I kept going.

***

Seated on an old oaken throne, her legs thrown over the arm rest, and her back leaning against the other, the Succubus Milonia playfully swished her feet in the air, her tail whimsically whipping at the foot of the throne and her wings twitching and flexing. With a glass filled nearly to the brim with a deep red wine in one hand and the thumb of her left hand filing and cleaning the other nails, she hummed a little song to herself. Sprawled on the room surrounding her, down the stairs from her throne which stood where the mayor sat in town hall meetings in decades past, were sleeping young and handsome men whom she had handpicked for herself. A succubus unable to find their compatible mate must still receive spirit energy, and one as powerful, noble and of high rank such as herself needed a great deal of energy. For now, she was satisfied, simply waiting for day to come, the time she'd sleep most peacefully.

At the base of the stairs leading to her throne, wisps of black smoke swirled, and a minor gale of wind kicked up. Materializing in that smoke's place, a woman dressed in black and vibrant pink appeared on one knee. With a pink mask covering her nose and mouth she was bowing her head in deference to the succubus seated on the throne. She had all the markings of a ninja from the east, but her pointed elven ears, the seductive and vivacious dress that exposed her thighs, cleavage and arms and the swirling black mist of demonic energy that hung in the air before her sudden appearance indicated this was no human. It was a monster. One of the kunoichi from an island far away to the east. A few tribal tattoos on her thigh, arm and breast marked her clan, the Shadow Glades. Master of stealth and subterfuge but, unlike human ninja, they were masters of the mystic

arts of seduction that can bring any man to their knees and bend him to her will and ultimately to the will of this girl's master.

“Ah Shizuka, you come at last.” Milonia chuckled.

Milonia hadn't even looked in the direction of the kunoichi, but she knew exactly who she was, and that she had arrived at all, even when she had without making a noise at all.

Milonia titled her neck and looked at the prostrating ninja and with an eager smile asked excitedly, “What good news do you bring me today? You must hurry. I have guests to greet this morning. Oh? Did I say guests...” Her smile turned wicked, and her voice twisted and venomous, “I meant new brother and sisters. Oh~ I really do want to have a taste of that young man. I'm sure those two will understand. Don't you think?”

“Mistress.” Shizuka spoke flatly yet betrayed a hint of a dire within her tone.

“Yes? Speak now. Perhaps you wish to tell me yourself how last night went. You must know how excited I am to have new playthings. It has been ever so long.”

Shizuka took a deep breath and with her head still bowed spoke, “The three foreigners... They are gone.”

Milonia's face did not change one bit, but the grip she had on her glass slipped, and it fell from her hand. Shattering on the steps, the wine inside rolled down the stone toward the ninja kneeling down below. With her face still frozen, she sat herself properly on her throne before her face twisted from wicked grin to an angry menace.

“They what?” Milonia bellowed.

“At the first coming of the sun over the horizon, I saw the three of them leaving down the path to the south.”

Milonia clenched her fist together and slammed them on the arms of her throne.

“That's impossible. You told me not long ago of all the wild things happening in that room. The room I prepared myself. A room I flooded with enough demonic energy to-”

“Regardless, my mistress, that does not change the fact that the three of them have left-

“Then after them. Bring the lizard, the dog and that man back!”

“Is this what you wish? I have learned that the Salamander is the one known as The Thorn Knight. The wolf is no wolf but an anubis. One this far north, on this continent is... unpredicted. Her divine power considerable, abnormal... Alarming.”

“Are you telling me you cannot? Or will not?”

Shizuka did not say a thing, she kept her head bowed and silent. Milonia clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“The man among them... The one who called himself, 'Laven'. Rumors which I cannot confirm nor deny swirl around him. A man in the company of monsters, not unknown to the embrace of monsters, all but immune to holy water.”

Milonia's eyes widened at this news, and her voice cracked, “Immune? Then perhaps to the corruption of demonic energy too-” Milonia went deep into thought before continuing, “Does Princess Elektra know of this?”

“Princess Elektra has not been seen for some time. Her research and herself she hides well. I have not had the time nor resources to find her again.”

“Then your next task is to do just that, Shizuka. I hear rumors she has been depressed since her last experiment ended in failure... But something as interesting as this... I think she would find it very... fascinating.” Milonia said, an unbelievable amount of venom dripping from the last carefully chosen word.

Nodding her bowed head once, the kunoichi reduced herself to a swirling mist of black fog and scattered to the four winds, only the sound of a light foot step signaling her departure: her vector, speed and destination unknown.

Leaning back on her throne and tenting her fingers and long nails together Milonia grinned another sinister grin, “I'm sad you did not get a chance to play with your big sister, Laven~ But I'm sure you'll have some fun in the near future. Oh ho ho ho ho~” She laughed, holding her hand daintily next to her mouth.

***

I felt strangely refreshed. Never had I felt better, so far as my limited memory stretches back... Although I wasn't exactly sure how. My hips were still sore; I wasn't sure of all the details; my memory got a little foggy about half way through until they cut off completely, but I did awake on a soft bed... naked... with my arms around Susan and Rose who were also naked. They were sleeping so peacefully; their faces glowing and smiles plastered on their faces. It took me about ten minutes just to work up the willingness to wake them up. We had places to go though. It was dawn, and we had to get away from this place as fast as possible There was something that felt very off about this place, something eating away at the back of my mind. I think it was also a bad influence on the girls. After all they... well, they both went a little, well, wild to say the least last night.

“I feel like I'm forgetting something.” Rose suddenly said; my heart stopped in my chest. “You feel like you're forgetting something too, Hannah?”

“No, not at- I said stop calling me that!” Susan yelled back, only noticing after a second.

She's getting quicker with her retorts.

“Laven, do you remember anything.”

“I only remember you pushing yourselves on me when we agreed not to. Did neither of you remember what we were told?”

“Eh heh heh,” Rose chuckled. “Sorry about that. The mood felt just right, and I just had to. Well... After I thought I lost you before back in Vilm...” Her voice dropped low with a tinge of sadness in it. “Aw, forget it! We're fine now.” She yelled, now walking backwards to point at Susan. “But we still have a score to settle, Susan.”

“I said my name is not-” Susan said, shuddering in barely contained rage.

“Last night doesn't count! No one knows the score, so we'll just have to do that again-”

“No!” Susan and I yelled in unison, although I'm sure for different reasons based on different recollections of last night.

“Alright, alright. Sheesh.” Rose groaned, disappointed.

Rose fell back to my right with Susan on my left, and we walked

the old path partially reclaimed by the forest and meadows. The sun rose above the hills and warned the dewy fields of green, and the song birds chirped in the trees all around us we walked on.

“Hey, Susan.” Rose said, interrupting the pleasant silence.

Susan didn't say a thing.

“I said hey... I spy with my little eye-”

“No! Not this again. Can you not be silent for once?” Susan turned and yelled; her patience snapping easier than a twig.

“Alright alright.” Rose quipped. “It's green by the way.”

“ARRRRGGH!” Susan growled and took a swipe across my chest at the Salamander.

Rose—who was holding onto my arm—leaned far back to dodge the claw swipe. But Susan didn't stop, and she came barreling right into me. Half my weight was pulled that way already so I lost my footing and fell into Rose carrying Susan along with me. In one collective yelp of surprise we fell off the road and into the ditch on the side of the path in a heap. I wasn't sure where my hands were, or my face, or anything really, but my landing was very soft. Too soft. We were twisted into a mess, a heap. The two of them fought and struggled to pry the other off of me. Their breasts and butts and other embarrassing unmentionables pressed up against me.

“This is gonna be a long journey after all.” I sighed.